

THE SLATER FIRE WAS THE PRODUCT OF SETTLER COLONIALISM

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## ABSTRACT

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The Slater Fire of 2020 burned in Karuk aboriginal territory overseen by the Klamath National Forest. It burned over 200 homes to the ground and ravage over 100,000 acres of forest. This thesis argues that state-enforced fire suppression policies and methods are tools of settler-colonial erasure and the continuation of genocidal violence towards Karuk people. It analyzes the conflict between interests of the colonial state on one side and Indigenous resistance and survival on the other. Fire is an essential tool for the survival of Indigenous cultural identities, the material security of said populations, and the health of the environs that they have inhabited since time immemorial. In describing the history of this conflict, this work synthesizes historical narratives with critical analysis to demonstrate the aims of state sponsored fire suppression, and to illustrate the necessity of Indigenous populations' ability to apply cultural fire.

Settler colonial studies serve as the analytical foundation for this piece of research. Settler colonialism functions as a crossroads of critical theories that illuminate various ways that the settler state perpetuates regimes of erasure and genocidal violence towards Indigenous peoples and their lands. Ecological frameworks critical of settler land

and resource management practices and policies are utilized to demonstrate the effects of settler-colonialism on Karuk spaces and peoples. The lived experiences and histories of Karuk people are a central feature of this thesis that have been accessed via interviews with cultural practitioners and community members and the analysis of various historical sources. This thesis illustrates the connection between genocide perpetrated towards Indigenous peoples during the 19th century and ongoing genocidal violence inherent within fire suppression and land management regimes maintained within the United States of America.

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## INTRODUCTION

On the morning of September 8, 2020, residents of the town of Happy Camp, California awoke to a glowing, smoke spewing inferno approaching their homes. The small, rural town is surrounded by National Forest land and while its community is used to wildfires, this fire was apocalyptic in terms of size and the ferocity with which the wind-swept blaze tore through homes and forest alike. Many residents had done everything in their power to prevent such a fire from happening and had labored to protect their homes via community outreach and fuels reduction on and near their land. The Slater Fire, as it came to be known, burned in such a way that even the most prepared residents had only enough time to grab a few of their most precious personal items before fleeing their homes. The fire obliterated people's lives and disproportionately impacted Karuk people.

This research project seeks to understand the events that led to the Slater Fire of 2020 in Happy Camp, California. Happy Camp is a rural community in Siskiyou County situated on the Klamath River at the very northern end of the state. The Slater Fire began on September 8th of 2020 and by the time it burned out had ravaged over 150,000 acres of Klamath, Six-Rivers, and Rogue-Siskiyou National Forests. It destroyed more than 200 homes, the majority of which were those of Karuk Tribal members (Akins & Bauer). This destruction came in the months after the Klamath National Forest administration rejected a collaborative fuels reduction proposal created to protect Tribal and community housing. The proposal sought a collaborative agreement to reduce fuels via brushing and

burning. These fuels remained in the forest until they exploded during the Slater wildfire and propelled waves of flame into the neighborhood below. While the fire itself may have been unavoidable due to climate and management factors, the transformation of a wildfire into an uncontrollable conflagration could have been prevented via collaboration between the Tribe, the greater Happy Camp community, and the Klamath National Forest.

The relationship between the Klamath National Forest and the Karuk Tribe has real world consequences for Karuk people whose aboriginal lands lie within the Forest's boundaries. This thesis argues that state-enforced fire suppression policies and methods utilized by the Klamath National Forest and other settler administrative bodies are manifestations of settler-colonial erasure and genocide of Indigenous peoples. It provides an analysis of the conflict between interests of the settler colonial state and timber production on one side and Indigenous cultural resistance, and regional ecological stability on the other. In describing the history of this conflict, this work synthesizes historical narratives with modes of critical analysis to demonstrate the aims of state sponsored fire suppression, and to show how Indigenous populations have continued to utilize fire on the landscape to ensure their cultural wellbeing and the ecological stability that that wellbeing depends upon. Fire is an essential tool for the survival of Indigenous cultural identities, the material security of said populations, and the health of the environs that they have inhabited since time immemorial (Anderson; Eriksen & Hankins; Lake & Christianson; Long et al.; Marks-Block et al.)

In my early 20s I moved to Orleans, California, a small community situated within the traditional territories of the Karuk people – about 35 miles, as the crow flies, southwest of the town of Happy Camp. Life on the Klamath River, especially for many of the Indigenous people who live there, is directly impacted by modes of land management and resource extraction that serve settler interests while undermining their social and cultural interests. In this context the settler entities gaining from Karuk displacement are the Klamath National Forest and timber interests that have commodified Karuk land for commercial timber production. Land management in the Klamath National Forest ignores Karuk territorial claims and culturally informed modes of land and resource management shaped over millennia by Karuk people and their neighbors – the continuation of commercial logging and the continuance of fire-suppression regimes in the Klamath Basin is at the expense of Indigenous populations who have been systematically attacked and institutionally marginalized since settlers arrived in the region.

In addition to threatening the ecological stability of vast swaths of northernmost California, the commodification of forests (Scott) and the implementation of fire-suppression regimes shaped solely by the interests of such commodification assault the cultural continuity of Klamath River Indigenous communities. The entirety of the Klamath River Basin is the traditional home of Indigenous peoples – Karuk – Yurok – Hoopa – Klamath – Shasta - all of whom had some historical dependence on landscapes tended via culturally informed prescribed fire and Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) (Reed). Culturally informed fire regimes are methods that have been developed over many generations that cultural burners use to choose when and how to apply fire.

Cultural fire is used to improve the health and productivity of a plethora of flora and fauna and to make the land easier to navigate and tend. The spaces inhabited by Karuk and other Indigenous people were generated via the intergenerational application of fire regimes shaped by the shared experiences and knowledges of people with intimate and far-reaching ecological understanding of their homelands. Cultural fire is one component of the diverse Traditional Ecological Knowledges developed by Indigenous peoples of the Klamath Basin.

Traditional Ecological Knowledges are ecological, scientific knowledges informed by the multi-generational observations and experimentations of Indigenous peoples seeking to develop mutually beneficial modes of tending within the spaces they inhabit. These relational interconnections are exemplified in the ways that Indigenous peoples interact with what settler society refers to as natural resources. TEK is informed by the understanding that living and non-living things that humans depend on for their sustenance and livelihoods do not exist solely for human consumption but are components within complex ecological systems wherein components of the natural world support one another in vastly numerous and complex ways. (Anderson; Lightfoot & Parrish; Norgaard)

These understandings exemplify Indigenous peoples' ability to support and be supported by the diverse spaces that they currently and historically inhabit. TEKs can help demonstrate the divergent philosophical viewpoints utilized by settler society to attack Indigenous peoples and lands – capitalism, commodification, and extractive industry are anathema to people whose lifeways are informed by TEK. TEK cannot be

synthesized with the exploitative systems imbued within settler colonial projects. The outcomes of the Slater Fire are the direct consequences of settler worldviews being violently projected onto Indigenous people and land.

As I spent more time amidst Indigenous people invested in dam removal efforts, and settlers who allied with them, I was introduced to several groups who had been organizing various modes of resistance to the ongoing ecological destruction caused by hydroelectric dams on the Klamath River (Hamilton et al.). Alliances had been developing for decades between the region's Indigenous peoples and special interest groups that understand hydroelectric dams to be detrimental to ecological stability. Communities throughout the Klamath Basin understand the destructive outcomes of maintaining outdated and inefficient hydroelectric dams. The dams block salmon runs and the movement of countless aquatic animals. They cause water caught in reservoirs to heat up to temperatures deadly for many fish and create conditions in which parasitic diseases run rampant through spawning and hatching fish populations. Their continued existence represents one of several continued existential threats to Karuk lifeways and the lifeways of their Indigenous neighbors. Resistance to continued ecological degradation caused by the dams became a rallying point for people from multiple communities (Most).

Initially, I understood this resistance to be regional in nature: I saw people from my community gathering to fight against entities who were disrupting the Klamath River's flow, blocking the movements of various fish species that depended on that flow, and undermining the interests of peoples whose cultural survival depended on those fish.

The fight was, and continues to be, an existential one: if the river is not made healthy, the people whose survival depends on it will decline accordingly.

Learning about resistance movements in the region, I came to slowly see the battle to remove dams on the Klamath River as a single example of a widespread conflict between settler colonialism driven by the commodification of land and resources, and Indigenous peoples, their lands, and the lifeways that link them together. Development and modernity are rhetorical tools utilized to justify the creation of extractive mechanisms that serve the interests of a select few while undermining or poisoning the life sources of communities who are linked by cultural traditions to the land. Just as hydroelectric dams were justified by the rhetoric of modernity and progress, so was fire suppression justified by the rhetoric of commodification and extraction – they each represent the interests of capital being masked as beneficial, even essential, for the advancement of society (Scott). While the forms of development various communities are forced to resist are often different from one another, they follow a recognizable pattern of interwoven commodification, extraction, and Indigenous erasure exemplified within settler colonial logics (Tuck & Yang; Wolfe). Fire suppression and its various outcomes are manifestations of the attitudes and methods used to first install and then maintain hydroelectric dams in the Klamath Basin.

Understanding resistance on the Klamath River as one microcosm of a larger set of global interactions helped develop my understanding of capitalism and coloniality. It has been illuminating and unnerving to grasp that the struggle that my neighbors and friends were engaged in was one of many battles being fought around the planet. The

realities of other settled nation states mirror those created in the United States - the recent destructive wildfires in Australia are disconcertingly like those occurring with increased regularity throughout California. These settled spaces continued to be influenced by fire suppression methods created to generate wealth for settler landowners and to undermine the symbiotic relationships between Indigenous peoples and their traditional homelands. Cultural fire has been criminalized and controlled in many colonized spaces to the detriment of Indigenous peoples and the overall, long-term stability and health of the land. The State of California's constitution, written in 1850, served to institutionalize fire suppression: "Fire suppression was mandated by the very first session of the California State Legislature in 1850 during the apex of genocide in the northern part of the state," (Norgaard *Salmon and Acorns Feed Our People* 75). In the United States, the Weeks Act of 1911 formally criminalized the cultural fire technologies implemented by Indigenous populations throughout its jurisdiction. The Act nationalized enormous tracts of public lands inhabited and maintained by Indigenous populations and created new means of implementing colonial modes of management and resource extraction. By enclosing grasslands and forests and creating the National Forest system, the U.S. sought to extract wealth from the land in new and more economically efficient ways. The Weeks Act indicates the prioritization of the accumulation of wealth via timber production and land commodification at the expense of Indigenous populations who have lived in these places according to their own lifeways since time immemorial. (Davis)

Since the adoption of fire suppression regimes, wildfire has become an increasingly dangerous and destructive element in the Klamath Basin and throughout

California and Oregon. The “fire season,” has grown longer over the last decade. Wildfires have become larger and more out of control and have burned through heavily populated areas; “The average number of fires over 1,000 acres has doubled in California since the 1970s at the same time as high-severity fires have become more frequent,” (Norgaard *Salmon and Acorns* 126). Fighting wildfire has become an enormous industry with billions of dollars being poured by federal and state governments into firefighting and fire infrastructure every year.

Traditional Ecological Knowledge and culturally informed fire regimes are essential tools in stabilizing landscapes currently susceptible to destructive wildfire, protecting communities from wildfire, and recentering Indigenous cultural sovereignty and continuity. There needs to be a shift away from fire suppression towards fire and land management methods that consider the historical generation of tended Indigenous spaces in the Klamath Basin and other colonized regions. These adaptations should propel the restoration of Indigenous relationships with land and resources.

My experiences have led me to adopt and utilize the framework of settler colonialism as a means of understanding the social, economic, and cultural structures that shape the community I live in and those communities nearest me. I have lived my entire life on occupied Indigenous lands. These understandings and perspectives have driven a critique of the discursive and material realities I navigate as a white, cis-gendered man and how such realities are inherently different for people of other ethnicities, cultures, and identities.

Settler colonialism claims land inhabited by other people according to certain logics. Patrick Wolfe illustrates various modes by which colonial entities create and perpetuate “logics of erasure,” to justify their theft and continued occupation of Indigenous lands. Wolfe’s analysis demonstrates how race and racism are used by colonial structures to achieve the twin roles of the settler project: “summary liquidation of Indigenous people,” and simultaneous construction of a “new colonial society on the expropriated land base,” (Wolfe 388). Tuck and Yang’s scholarship builds on Wolfe’s work in describing the unique ways that settler colonialism interacts with and depends on land.

“Settler colonialism is different from other forms of colonialism in that settlers come with the intention of making a new home on the land, a homemaking that insists on settler sovereignty over all things in their new domain... Within settler colonialism, the most important concern is land/water/air/subterranean earth... Land is what is most valuable, contested, required. This is both because the settlers make Indigenous land their new home and source of capital, and because the disruption of Indigenous relationships to land represents a profound epistemic, ontological, cosmological violence. This violence is not temporally contained in the arrival of the settler but is reasserted each day of occupation. Therefore, Patrick Wolfe emphasizes that settler colonialism is a structure and not an event. In the process of settler colonialism, land is remade into property and human relationships to land are restricted to the relationship of the owner to his property. Epistemological, ontological, and cosmological relationships to land are interred, indeed made pre-modern and backward. Made savage,” (Tuck & Yang 5).

In addition to illustrating the dual-pronged intent of settler colonial logics, Wolfe argues that settler colonialism's dependency on cultural and physical modes of erasure means that settler colonialism is inherently linked to, and dependent upon, the genocide of Indigenous peoples. Settler colonialism should not be understood as an event but as an ongoing set of processes aimed at the ultimate erasure of Indigeneity both in terms of human bodies and their relationship with land. Wolfe's critique illuminates the connections between various colonial racial hierarchies imposed upon Indigenous and other non-white settler populations with themes of modernity, and development often utilized by settler societies to justify their behaviors and institutions. Wolfe's work illustrates several ways in which race and varying degrees of "whiteness," are both imposed upon and utilized by some Indigenous people and how these manifestations of the settler project serve to perpetuate the interests of capitalism and colonial expansion (Wolfe).

This thesis seeks to respond to recent events that have deep-reaching historical roots. It has been produced at a time when recently published books and research papers offer an invaluable foundation for additional analysis (Akins & Bauer, Vinyeta). These sources and the critiques they offer further demonstrate the timeliness of conversations about fire suppression, and wildfire while critically examining the historical narratives that have played such powerful roles in forming the ecological realities fire-impacted communities are forced to navigate today (Norgaard "The effects of altered diet on the health of the Karuk people," "The Politics of Fire and the Social Impacts of Fire Exclusion on the Klamath").

The goal of this work is to contribute to an ongoing examination of the outcomes of settler colonial disruption of Indigenous lifeways in the Klamath Basin and neighboring regions and to better understand the ways that settler colonial logics imbue land and resource management policy and practice with themes of commodification and cultural erasure (Bacon). This work reflects on, and hopes to add to, the critical analysis of fire-suppression in colonized spaces and makes connections between the history of genocide of Indigenous peoples in Northern California (Lindsay; Norton, *Genocide in Northwestern California*; Trafzer & Hyer) and ongoing efforts to destroy Karuk access to land and resources as an outcome of the logics of erasure manifest in the settler colonial state (Wolfe).

Due to the nature of this topic – the trauma experienced by generations of Karuk people at the hands of the state and exacerbated by the more contemporary deadly mismanagement of land and resources – and my own positionality in terms of systemic privileges and location – much of the research for this project is rooted in participatory research methods. I spent time speaking with people affected by the Slater Fire and other fires like it. Our conversations followed my intention as a researcher to work with participants as partners in praxis – this is a collaborative product whose purpose and tone should be shaped by a desire to illuminate overlooked experiences to contribute to a more dynamic understanding of recent events in the Klamath Basin. This is, and should be, a collaborative piece of scholarship generated in the interests of the Karuk Tribe.

Indigenous and settler primary sources focused on the early interactions between various actors (for example, forest service employees at the turn of the 20th century – and

Indigenous people engaged in various modes of cultural continuance and resistance to settler colonial infringement) contribute to the historical narrative woven into this work. The histories of the Klamath Basin, before the large-scale settler invasion that began in the late 1840s, and in the decades leading up to the Slater Fire of 2020, are important to critique in deconstructing and confronting the driving factors and ongoing impacts of the fire itself.

If settler communities want to recenter cultural fire as a tool for holistic land and resource management, they need to understand the history of cultural fire and the outcomes of its criminalization for the Karuk Tribe and other Indigenous peoples. They need to come to terms with the institutional violence manifest in fire suppression and understand it as a continuation of attitudes and policies rooted in the state-sanctioned genocide of Indigenous peoples in California and take action to interrupt the ongoing processes of settler coloniality.

Wildfire has become an increasingly disruptive component for Indigenous and settler communities alike throughout California and other Western states. As climate change continues to compound the ecological disruptions caused by settler colonial land and resource management practices, communities desperately need to reconsider fire suppression as an applicable land management regime. Not only is fire suppression a component of ongoing cultural genocide aimed at the erasure of Indigenous peoples in the Klamath Basin and throughout the United States, but it is also a management system and ethos that threatens the health and livelihoods of entire swaths of the state's population. Klamath Basin and Californian communities cannot afford to continue to

think about or treat fire in this way any longer – to continue the use of fire-suppression as it is currently implemented will mean the continuation of out-of-control, destructive wildfire seasons. To come to terms with the failure of fire suppression as theory and practice, there needs to be an ongoing conversation about the history of management decisions and their outcomes for Indigenous people in this state.

### Terminology

Before delving into the history of traditional Karuk cultural fire methods and what they mean for Karuk people and the spaces they inhabit, it is important to discuss the use of certain terms and concepts, specifically *Traditional Ecological Knowledge*, *cultural fire*, *resources*, and *tribe*. This discussion introduces and situates certain words that may seem benign at first but have deep-reaching consequences when considering colonized spaces and the unfolding realities navigated by Indigenous peoples in the modern moment.

*Traditional Ecological Knowledge* (TEK) describes Indigenous knowledge systems generated via long-term habitation within specific ecological networks. In the case of the Karuk people, TEK refers to culturally informed fire practices as well as multitudinous understandings of how plants and animals interact with one another and the landscapes traditional Karuk territories in the Klamath Basin. TEK is land-based knowledge that is informed by “direct human contact with the environment,” (Freeman; Berkes). TEK represents ways humans interact with the spaces and non-human species that inhabit those spaces and the perspectives that such relationality generates – by living

in interdependence with the living and geographical components of the world, Karuk, and Indigenous peoples more generally, have crafted lifeways intrinsically bound to place and relationality. TEK is guided by themes of reciprocity that shape the perspectives and values of those who utilize it. People informed by TEK care for the world they inhabit with the knowledge that the world will reciprocate their efforts in turn (Anderson).

“The foundation of native people’s management of plants and animals was a collective storehouse of knowledge about the natural world, acquired over hundreds of years through direct experience and contact with the environment. The rich knowledge of how nature works and how to judiciously harvest and steward plants and animals without destroying them was hard-earned; it was the product of keen observation, patience, experimentation, and long-term relationships with plants and animals. It was a knowledge based on history, gained through many generations of learning passed down by elders about practical as well as spiritual practices. This knowledge today is commonly called “traditional ecological knowledge.” (Anderson)

TEK stands in stark contrast to attitudes and beliefs actively promulgated within settler societies. As mentioned in the Introduction, TEK cannot be synthesized with settler land management practices and attitudes that understand space, living and nonliving things in extractive and utilitarian ways. According to the worldviews that shape various TEKs, the world does not exist for the sole purpose of supporting the expansive needs of capital-driven societies. TEK reflects an understanding of the world wherein every living and nonliving component (from the lowliest ant to the largest boulder) has a role in enriching the lives of something or somethings it interacts with. Reciprocity and mutuality are at the center of TEK and Indigenous worldviews that are philosophically divergent from those that support settler worldviews such as capitalism, and colonial expansion.

*Cultural fire* is a central component of Karuk Traditional Ecological Knowledge. Cultural fire is a concept that interplays with that of prescribed fire but has certain, important differences. Cultural fire is an outcome of multigenerational, reciprocal relationships maintained by populations in specific places. In the context of this project, cultural fire is a technology developed over centuries or millennia by Karuk people and their Indigenous neighbors. As a technology it has been shaped by the intimate observation and understanding of ecological interactions within the landscapes inhabited by Karuk people. It is an essential tool in Karuk efforts to perpetuate ecological interactions that contribute to their cultural resilience and continuity and the wellness of the environments they inhabit; a medicine that renews the land for the benefit of all who live on it (Anderson).

Prescribed fire is dependent on Western modes of scientific understanding. It is guided by certain principals like fuel conditions, humidity levels, and temperature: “Prescribed fire is implemented based on a ‘prescription’ derived from models to determine conditions for burning.” Cultural burning, on the other hand, “implies the purposeful use of fire by a cultural group...for a variety of purposes and outcomes,” ranging from “maintenance of travel corridors, wildlife habitat improvement, attracting wildlife to a place, water stewardship, pest control, stewardship of cultural plants, conservation/protection, and even spiritual reasons,” (Tribe). Prescribed fire is informed by Western modes of scientific understanding shaped by settler valuation of land and resources while cultural fire is guided by a scientific understanding informed by Traditional Ecological Knowledge and holistic perspectives of the value and roles of

various lifeforms and spaces. TEK is a mode of scientific mode of understanding informed by time, observation, and effort on the part of Indigenous peoples in their homelands (Anderson; Norgaard *Salmon and Acorns Feed Our People*).

This research paper analyzes the various ways Karuk and settler populations use and think about resources. The word *resource* is, in and of itself, loaded with specific understandings and attitudes towards the natural world. It indicates the assumption that materials are meant to be transformed into goods that are meant for consumption by human beings. Resources, as a conceptual marker, indicate that human beings are the apex-consumer towards which all goods flow. This reflects an anthropocentric worldview in which the world and its contents are to be commodified and consumed: “With the advent of industrialism and colonialism... a conceptual break occurred. ‘Natural resources,’ became those parts of nature which were required as inputs for industrial production and colonial trade,” (Sachs 228). These values and attitudes exist in stark contrast to TEK-informed lifeways historically utilized by Indigenous peoples. Their “kincentric ecology” is based in the understanding that humans are a single component of a familial structure enveloping the entirety of the natural world.

Indigenous people view both themselves and nature as part of an extended ecological family that shares ancestry and origins. It is an awareness that life in any environment is viable only when humans view the life surrounding them as kin. The kin, or relatives, include all the natural elements of an ecosystem. Indigenous people are affected by and, in turn, affect the life around them. The interactions that result from this "kincentric ecology" enhance and preserve the ecosystem. Interactions are the commerce of ecosystem functioning. Without human recognition of their role in the complexities of life in a place, the life suffers and loses its sustainability. Indigenous cultural models of nature include humans as one aspect of the complexity of life. (Salmón)

Karuk cultural worldviews and the lifeways they inform are imbued with the belief that animals, plants, and natural objects such as rocks, streams, rivers, and mountains are part of the same familial entity as human beings. What Eurocentric science-informed worldviews see as less-than-human, Indigenous worldviews simply experience as other-than. According to Karuk Indigenous perspectives, the natural world and its varied components that exist within their homelands are not resources for extraction and commodification but are relatives that deserve respect on par with that held for other human beings (Salmón).

Critically examining the ways that the settler project has labeled Karuk society, in addition to the ways settlers think about and label other living and non-living entities, helps further illustrate the ways the settler colonialism projects certain realities and definitions onto the Indigenous populations it seeks to marginalize and erase. The word *tribe* is inherently problematic in describing Indigenous people's culture, society, or political organization. *Tribe* assumes a cohesive political organization that does not reflect how people, like the Karuk, saw themselves. According to settler logic, *tribes* are racially defined social units which are easier to control, both conceptually and physically, than the less-definable realities represented by Indigenous social structures (Sneath; Whyte "Indigeneity and Us Settler Colonialism").

Before settler invasion and genocidal violence, Karuk people lived in village-based egalitarian societies wherein political and social hierarchies were relatively fluid. Villages shared language and some cultural practices but were not overseen by any political authority and functioned according to their individual wants and needs. Karuk

people were forced to identify as a single, unified people, or *tribe*, under the settler colonial regime and does not represent the historical social or political organization of Karuk people (Norgaard *Salmon and Acorns Feed Our People*).

These terms have been discussed to serve as a framework for better understanding the conflict between settler society and Karuk culture. This analysis of settler land and resource management and its outcomes for one Indigenous people is not a simple critique of a conflict over the use of resources / relatives. It is a critique of a conflict between divergent worldviews that inform how people live in a given place and of how they interact with the worlds they inhabit. It is an analysis of existential combat between a dominant, consumptive socio-economic system reliant on the constant consumption of land and a people whose ability to persist is rooted in the continuation of lifeways intimately bound to land (Bacon).

## CHAPTER 1: HISTORY OF KARUK CULTURAL FIRE

Many children in the United States, and other settler colonial societies for that matter, are taught about the wilderness that their societies were built atop. Wildernesses were something to be dominated and utilized by growing nations. Civilization moved into wilderness to make it viable for humans to live in. This rhetoric lies at the heart of the concept of Manifest Destiny utilized by the U.S. settler project in its westward expansion to the Pacific Ocean. Manifest Destiny offered settlers with moral justification for their territorial expansion into so-called wildernesses. Wilderness is a social construction utilized by settlers to justify their treatment of land and Indigenous peoples.

Conceptually, wilderness serves to erase the intimate, longstanding relationships between Indigenous peoples and the lands they have tended (Anderson; Gilio-Whitaker).

Enormous tracts of land deemed uncivilized and wild were, in fact, swaths of carefully tended territory made productive by the systematic interventions of Indigenous peoples.

Human beings created the “Eden,” that settlers fought over to integrate into their colonized possession. Indigenous people, via many generations of careful application and observation, found ways to make the land support their interests without seeking to irreparably mar it via hyper-extraction and commodification. Indigenous peoples throughout the Americas lived in tended environments that supported their diverse lifeways. The Karuk people of the mid Klamath Basin are one such people.

### Karuk people, TEK, and Cultural Fire

What is commonly referred to as the United States of America has been shaped by wildfire for millennia. Lightning strikes have sparked thousands of wildfires from Florida to the Southwestern states and up into the sprawling grasslands of the Midwest.

According to fire ecologist Stephen Pyne, “For every fire nature started, people started ten or more,” (Pyne *Between Two Fires: A Fire History of Contemporary America*). Long before the invasion of the Americas by Europeans, Indigenous peoples used fire to manage their homelands for a wide variety of reasons. Grasslands, woodlands, and forests were carefully burned according to culturally informed fire practices that improved the health of plants and created ecological conditions that were to the advantage of Indigenous people. Fire was used to ensure the productivity of essential foodstuffs, medicinal plants, and crafting materials that Indigenous populations relied on for their material and spiritual cultures. It improved grazing zones for various animals hunted and trapped by Indigenous populations and made the landscape easier to navigate and see through (Anderson; Lightfoot and Parrish; Pyne *Between Two Fires*).

California, as in other regions throughout the Americas, is rich with fire-adapted flora. As many as three-fourths of the plants that make up California’s vegetation are adapted to benefit from wildfire (Anderson). Cultural fire was used by Indigenous populations throughout the area that would become the state of California in the mid-1800s. It promoted the growth of certain desirable plant species, cleared competing species and underbrush, made areas around villages and more dense populations safer

from lightening fire, and improved grasslands for grazing game animals. Fire made the land more productive and more predictable (Lightfoot and Parrish).

Karuk people historically lived in villages spreading along “flats and meadows found at the confluences of the many creeks feeding the Klamath River and a ... stretch up the Salmon River.” They have lived in these places since “the beginning of time,” (Lang). Their territories lie within the Klamath Basin from just upriver of the confluence of the Trinity and Klamath Rivers to Seiad Valley in the northeast and along the Salmon River in the southeast.

## KARUK ABORIGINAL TERRITORY

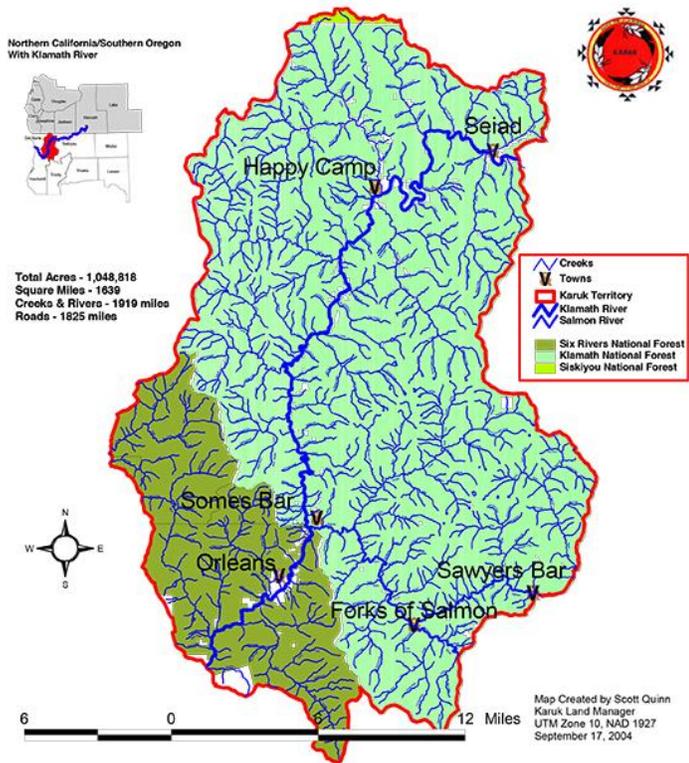


FIGURE 1: Map of Karuk Aboriginal Territory

Oral histories maintained by Karuk people describe the historical occurrence and essential nature of culturally informed fire regimes (Lake). Before large-scale Euro-American settlement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the militarized, systematic commodification of Karuk land and natural resources under the settler colonial project, fire was one of the essential tools freely utilized by Karuk people to care for their homelands. According to interviews with Karuk cultural burning practitioner and retired Forest Service archaeologist Kathy McCovey, women and men applied fire to the landscape according to certain social parameters. Women were tasked with maintaining a mile-wide ring of burned land around villages and men burned an additional two-mile circumference around the closer-to-home ring. The ring maintained by women consisted of “a fine grain mosaic of oak woodlands and grasslands... that was done by the women for medicinal herbs, basket material [and] medicinal plants.” Other zones were fire-maintained according to the needs of the community – certain meadows and oak groves further out from the more populated centers were burned to ensure the health of valuable plants, the shape and health of plants for basket weaving, and the health of acorn harvests. Sites of ceremonial importance were also burned during certain times of the year to clear land and to maintain ecological stability as described above (McCovey).

Cultural fire has many positive outcomes for terrestrial flora and fauna, but it was also utilized to assist aquatic species that are a dietary cornerstone for the Karuk and their neighbors. Tribes who inhabit the Klamath Basin are salmon people – their societies, their lifestyles, their physical, cultural, and social health are all dependent on seasonal salmon runs that, before the installation of ecologically disastrous hydroelectric dams in

the 20<sup>th</sup> century, saw predictable arrival of enormous amounts of Chinook and Coho in rivers that run through the homelands of Yurok, Hupa, Karuk, Shasta, and Klamath peoples (Norgaard *Salmon and Acorns Feed Our People*).

Fire was used to assist anadromous fish during the hardest part of their spawning migration or run. Karuk religious leaders would start fires near the pools in the river where salmon grouped before migrating further upriver (Norgaard *Salmon and Acorns*). The Klamath experiences low flow and hot temperatures during late summer that make fish lethargic and slow their upriver migration. Smoke from prescribed fires started according to cultural knowledge generates an inversion layer over the river, cooling the water and alleviating stressors experienced by the fish (Robock). Fire, applied according to the accumulated cultural knowledge of many generations of Karuk people and their neighbors, helped salmon migrate to their spawning grounds, contributing to the productivity of future generations of fish. These practices also helped the Karuk's upriver neighbors who relied on fish making their way through Yurok and Karuk territories in great enough numbers to ensure their access to prolific fisheries.

Acorns, another foundational staple of Indigenous life in the Klamath Basin, benefit from the application of prescribed fire. Acorns were, and continue to be, collected at certain times of year by families who have tended specific oak groves for generations. They are gathered and leached of tannins before being made into flour and used in porridges, bread, and soups. Acorns were an essential component of the diet of Karuk people and all their closest neighbors (Norgaard *Salmon and Acorns*). By introducing low-intensity fires at the right time of year and according to culturally informed

parameters (Lake and Christianson), Karuk people reduce competition for acorn producing oak trees by burning saplings. Smoke and heat from low intensity prescribed fires also reduces the number of parasitic insects that negatively impact the health of oak trees and the viability of acorns produced (Long; Lake and Goode).

Fire is an essential tool in the tending of many foodstuffs that historically supported the well-being and lifeways of Karuk people. Acorn-producing oak groves and migrating salmon populations were made more productive and predictable by the application of prescribed fire. Other important and valuable plants were also tended with fire. Another example of ecological enhancement via cultural fire is the positive outcomes of burning hazelnut shrubs: when burned frequently (every 3-5 years) hazelnut shrubs experience improved branch density and produce branches that are excellent for basketry (Marks-Block et al.).

Baskets and woven goods were historically used for storage, moving materials (bags and backpacks), cooking, clothing, nets for fishing and hunting, and art (Lang). Ferns, bear grass, irises, willows, the above-mentioned hazel, and other plants were important components in the material lives of Karuk people (Anderson; Lightfoot and Parrish). Their relationships with these plants and the ways they altered the environment to promote certain kinds of beneficial growth further highlight the overarching importance and power of cultural fire in Karuk daily life.

The Karuk world was shaped by the careful and informed application of cultural fire, and their social and cultural successes and longevity indicate that the world they knew and tended would not exist without this dynamic knowledge and frequent

utilization of this powerful tool. Cultural fire allowed them to shape the landscape to meet their material needs and maintain ecological relationships that informed their social and cultural structures. Many plants utilized in Karuk material culture do not produce useful shoots or other growth forms without the application of cultural fire (Reece).

There is another compelling reason for Karuk people to use fire as a management tool: it helped them protect their families and homes from wildfires that, if unchecked, could prove destructive and deadly. Karuk people recognized the potential danger of unmanaged grasslands and woodlands. They used fire to clear low-lying fuels during the safest time of year so that when the land was dry and hot during the late-summer months there was less chance of conflagration. By allowing slow-moving fire to clear understory fuels, Karuk created safe-zones wherein fire could not ladder up lower branches and ignite the tops of trees. This slowed the spread of naturally ignited wildfires and made them less destructive to community interests. Homes were safer and the areas that people tended for nutritional, medicinal, and material purposes stood a better chance of weathering fire season. Fires helped Karuk people control the location of softwoods like Douglas fir and pine trees, that tend to burn faster and can contribute to the rapid growth of wildfires. They tended forests in ways that greatly reduced the existential threat of wildfires (McCovey).

### Settler Invasion and the Interruption of Cultural Fire

Settlers that participated in the wholesale invasion of California after the discovery of gold in 1848 noted the widespread use of prescribed fire by Indigenous

peoples and its positive effects on vegetation and landscapes. Many adopted prescribed burning practices for their own purposes and some even learned burning techniques from their Indigenous neighbors (Anderson; Pyne *California: A Fire Survey*). Some settlers had previous experience with prescribed fire as a mode of land management – they had learned burning practices in other parts of the country before migrating to the west coast (Catton).

For many settlers, these were recognizable management systems - they had been utilized by peasants and farmers in Europe for centuries up to and after the mass migrations that propelled population growth in the “New World,” (Griffiths and Robin). In other words, fire was not an unknown land and resource management tool for many Euro-American settlers who acted as the vanguard of westward expansion in newly claimed “American,” territories. Ecologists and historians understand that the landscapes of Europe were shaped by prescribed fire long before they were carved by plows and sequestered into private properties via the enclosing of the commons. Fire was used to create productive farmland and to maintain it over time. Burning was well-known method in a multiyear agricultural process that enriched soil for planting (Griffiths and Robin).

Settlers in northeastern states had learned forest clearing techniques used by Indigenous peoples of the region and many of their compatriots learned how to use prescribed fire from their Indigenous neighbors in the Klamath Basin. A letter written in 1918 by a Forest Service Supervisor in the Klamath National Forest, a F.W. Harley, described the ongoing use of prescribed fire by both settler and Indigenous populations throughout the Basin. According to the author, many fires were started by settlers to tend

grazing pastures. These tended to be more destructive and had more of a tendency to get out of control compared to “Indians burning for basket material,” (Harley). Regardless of the cause or intention behind these set fires, they indicate the perceived value of such methods amongst Indigenous and settler communities alike and provide examples of the continued use of cultural and prescribed fire long after the early years of Euro-American colonization in the Klamath Basin and the fire-suppression policies imposed on Indigenous peoples by the State of California from its earliest legislative sessions onwards (Davis). What compelled varying populations to apply fire to the landscape is particularly important in understanding the long-term ramifications of institutionalized fire suppression.

Fire has spiritual value and deep-reaching cultural importance for Karuk people. Their material lives and physical wellbeing were, and in many cases continue to be, supported by the ecological outcomes of fire-maintained landscapes. In the decades following the integration of California into the United States Karuk people continued to put “good fire,” on the ground as an act of cultural continuance and to ensure the health and productivity of the lands they have inhabited since time immemorial (Clark).

In addition to the oral histories of the Karuk people and settler-generated sources indicating the wide-spread use of cultural fire, there is a significant body of Western-centric historical and ethnographic scholarship documenting the Karuk people’s use of cultural fire. John P. Harrington noted the use of prescribed fire in the preparation of tobacco gardens by Karuk people (Harrington). E.W. Gifford, who worked extensively with the anthropologist Alfred Kroeber, wrote about the Karuk tradition of performing

“incantations” to help guide a fire to be productive in accomplishing the intended management goal (“Hazel, iris, and *Xerophyllum* [bear grass] were burned off regularly to produce better growth.”) (Gifford).

As described in Omer C. Stewart’s work, Indigenous groups throughout the contemporary boundaries of Humboldt, Trinity, and Del Norte Counties used fire to clear favored hunting tracts of excessive vegetation, improve wild-seed crops, “increase feed for deer,” “increase growth of wild tobacco, and even to “make the springs flow.” Bill Gianella, cited in Stewart’s book *Forgotten Fires: Native Americans and the Transient Wilderness*, was told that his source was “sure that the burning made the springs run better, the clover grow[s] better, and the quail more plentiful and that the smoke kept the bugs down and kept the country healthy,” (Stewart).

The historical narrative of Karuk cultural fire use on the Klamath River is largely informed by oral histories and archival sources. Recent archaeological, palaeoecological, and ethnographic scholarship lends additional layers of context for understanding the role of fire in shaping the ecologies of the Klamath Basin and differentiating between naturally occurring fire outcomes and those reliant on human generated and engineered fire regimes. Though it has been historically difficult to differentiate between ecological outcomes driven by fires ignited via lightning versus fires ignited by human beings, there are emerging methodologies that allow researchers to “demonstrate that Native American influences on vegetation structure and composition can be distinguished using methods that take into account both physical and cultural aspects of the landscape,” (Crawford et al.). Pyrogeographic analysis enables the distinction between biological

adaptations triggered by environmental ignition sources such as lightning and those caused by the long-term application of cultural fire.

These analytical frameworks contribute to the existing narrative that the ecological diversity, complexity, and productivity of the Klamath Basin and large portions of the West Coast are the product of extensive, long-term Indigenous interventions. The ecological systems encapsulated in the Basin, including many of the plant species that are endemic to the region and the animal and insect populations that rely on them, have evolved according to the culturally driven actions of Karuk people and their neighbors (Halpern).

Pyrogeography, an emerging science that incorporates geography, history, ecology, and Indigenous knowledge systems, examines the ways that various fire regimes impact ecological interactions and adaptations. By examining the various outcomes of cultural fire compared to wildfire and integrating the knowledge of Indigenous cultural burners, pyro-geographers are contributing to a better understanding of the ways that plants and animals have adapted to cultural fire in comparison to wildfires started by lightning and other non-human sources of ignition (Bowman, O'Brien and Goldammer; Roos et al.).

Pyrogeographic analysis contributes to a developing understanding amongst scientists about the long-term effects of cultural burning on ecological diversity and lends depth and context to the extensive history of Karuk cultural burning. Understanding the ways that Karuk cultural fire has altered the landscapes and ecologies inhabited and shaped by Karuk people allows for the creation of a more in-depth narrative about their

reciprocal, intertwined relationship with the land they inhabit. Their use of cultural fire contributes to the ecological complexity of their homelands. Removing cultural fire from those ecosystems has disastrous consequences for Karuk people and their land (Bowman, O'Brien and Goldammer; Roos et al.).

The history of Karuk cultural fire is complex and nuanced. There are analytical frameworks being used to generate a dynamic understanding of the importance of these practices not only for Karuk cultural continuity but for the ecological complexity of the lands they inhabit. This history was violently interrupted by the invasion of settler populations and their associated institutions in the mid-1800s. Settler society was intensely alien compared to Karuk life before its arrival. The State of California, propelled by a seemingly insatiable greed for gold and land, perpetuated waves of genocidal violence towards Karuk people and their Indigenous neighbors throughout the new state's territories. This interruption involved the criminalization of cultural fire methods that served as a cornerstone of Karuk lifeways (Norton *Genocide in Northwestern California*, "To Destroy in Whole or in Part;" Trafzer and Hyer).

One of California's first laws were created to systematically destroy Indigenous populations that lived within the new state's territories. The Act for the Government and Protection of Indians, written into law in 1850, dictated how the state government and settler populations could treat Indigenous peoples. The Act allowed settlers to kidnap Indigenous children and sell them into slavery. It also effectively barred Indigenous people from representing themselves or their families in court and created state-sanctioned parameters for settlers to murder the state's Indigenous population. The Act,

as mentioned above, criminalized cultural fire use. The creation of the State of California and the development of the National Forest system in the following decades will be critiqued as modes of genocide in the following chapter. The chapter will examine the ways that these institutions embody settler colonial logics of erasure and genocide and how they serve as institutional foundations for the Slater Fire of 2020.

## CHAPTER 2: KARUK PEOPLE, CALIFORNIA STATEHOOD, AND THE UNITED STATES FOREST SERVICE

This chapter will critique the historical outcomes of the discovery of gold in what came to be known as the State of California, the Statehood of that territory, the creation of the United States Forest Service and the institutionalization of fire suppression within those institutions, and the outcomes of these events for Karuk people. It connects the earliest modes of genocidal violence meted out on Karuk people with the implementation of fire suppression regimes in their territories and illustrate how fire suppression functions as a mode of genocidal violence.

Discussing the term *genocide* and the various ways it is manifest in American history is an important foreword for this chapter. According to the logics of erasure described in the introduction, genocide is a structural component of settler colonialism: settler states are built on genocide. Genocide was first recognized as a crime after World War II during efforts to punish those that perpetrated the genocide of Jews during that global conflict. According to the *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*, genocide is defined as any of the following being perpetrated against a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group:

- a. Killing members of the group;
- b. Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- c. Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- d. Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- e. Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

As will be shown in this chapter, all these conditions were endured by Karuk people and other Indigenous groups in California during and after the wholesale invasion of their lands in the 1850s. Karuk people were killed, maimed, tortured, had “conditions of life calculated to bring about,” their destruction imposed upon them by settler populations and the State of California. Their reproductive rights were interrupted, and their children were taken from them and transferred to other groups via numerous legal mechanisms. Their lifeways were and are violently and intentionally interrupted to destroy them as a people. These interruptions continue to this day in the form of various state-imposed structures. This thesis critically examines the ways that settler land and resource management regimes perpetuate the genocide of Karuk people during the 21<sup>st</sup> century, over 170 years after the establishment of the State of California and over 70 years after the formal definition of the term genocide and the establishment of international laws created to prevent it and punish those who perpetuate it.<sup>1</sup>(Norton *Genocide in Northwestern California*)

The discovery of gold in California and the admittance of its territories into the United States of America in September of 1850 had disastrous consequences for the Indigenous peoples who had inhabited the state’s territories since time immemorial. While many of the Indigenous populations native to California had endured colonial

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<sup>1</sup> Jack Norton’s work *Genocide in Northwestern California: When Our Worlds Cried* is an essential analysis of the genocide of Indigenous people in California. While there is other more recent and more critically acclaimed scholarship on the topic, Norton’s work represents an Indigenous understanding of genocide in California synthesized with the criteria established by the U.N. and the International Criminal Court in the 1940s. While other sources are certainly worthy of analysis, Norton’s should serve as a foundational work for any scholar wishing to address the topic.

interventions for several hundred years, the peoples of the Klamath Basin, including the Karuk, had largely avoided large-scale interactions with settlers. Karuk territories, like many Indigenous homelands in the northern reaches of the state, were passed over by Spanish and subsequent Mexican colonial entities (Akins and Bauer). European trappers and explorers had made some incursions into the Klamath Basin and adjacent territories but California statehood, propelled by the discovery of gold near Sutter's Mill in 1848, led to the wholesale invasion of Karuk lands by Euro American settlers and the assertion of federal and state authority over all Indigenous peoples within the newly decided boundaries of the state (Akins and Bauer).

This chapter will discuss the evolution of the State of California and the creation of the National Forest service as settler colonial institutions and instruments in the genocide of Indigenous peoples. It will critique some of the earliest laws implemented by the new state and illustrate how they were used in the domination of Indigenous peoples. These laws were written to enable the wholesale theft of Indigenous lands and to propel the extermination of Indigenous populations. The creation of the State of California marked the beginning of waves of genocidal violence perpetuated by settler populations against Indigenous populations including the Karuk people. This institutionalized violence continued for decades and caused a rapid decline in Indigenous populations throughout the state. Campaigns of annihilation and displacement occurred throughout newly claimed Californian territories (Akins and Bauer; Lindsay; Madley; Norton *Genocide in Northwestern California*).

In his first State of the State Address in January of 1851, California governor Peter Burnett encapsulates settler attitudes towards Indigenous peoples during the state's infancy: "That a war of extermination will continue to be waged between the races until the Indian race becomes extinct must be expected. While we cannot anticipate this result but with painful regret, the inevitable destiny of the race is beyond the power or wisdom of man to avert." According to Burnett and many more in positions of power in the new state, Indigenous peoples were fated to annihilation. Their lands would, and should according to this same rhetoric, be subsumed by the settler projects to be managed and worked for profit and extraction. Settlers in California used genocide to steal Indigenous land. Management regimes such as fire suppression became a mainstay of settler management and were weaponized in the marginalization of Indigenous peoples. Genocidal attitudes and intent were imbued within the land and resource management regimes of the developing state apparatus from its earliest iterations. Simultaneously, elevating resource extraction methods and intents furthered extermination discourse promulgated from the beginning of California's Americanization and onwards. Resource extraction regimes that depend on genocide to clear land of Indigenous occupants continue to impact Indigenous peoples and their lifeways to this day.

### Creation of California's Genocidal Legal System

The first session of California's state legislature oversaw the creation of the perversely titled "Act for the Government and Protection of Indians." The Act created legal frameworks for how to treat Indigenous people whose traditional territories fell

within the new state boundaries. These frameworks gave White settlers authoritative power over Indigenous peoples including but not limited to the indenture of Indigenous children, the theft of Indigenous land, and the imprisonment and enslavement of Indigenous peoples under vagrancy laws. The Act criminalized cultural burning which, for Karuk people and many other Indigenous peoples, meant the criminalization of essential lifeways (Akins and Bauer).

It is important to recognize that the genocide of Indigenous people in California was not simply an outcome of vigilantism or the actions of a few bad actors. Genocide of Indigenous people in California was codified within the state's legislation and was the product of the new state's democratic processes. The legal apparatus of the state is as culpable in the deaths of Indigenous peoples as the people doing the actual killing. California's laws, created with the democratic approval of its residents, played a critical role in fomenting genocidal violence and protecting those that roamed its territories killing, raping, and kidnapping Indigenous people (Lindsay).

As the Californian genocidal regime evolved, restrictions on indenture were stripped away to enable the wholesale kidnapping and enslavement of Indigenous children. Laws created under the guise of protecting vulnerable Indigenous populations were utilized to systematically force them onto smaller and smaller pieces of land, to ensure their tertiary status within the legal system, and to protect settlers from legal repercussions as they perpetrated a reign of terror against Indigenous communities throughout the state. There are extensive court records and newspaper articles from the time that illustrate the violent outcomes of such laws. Both vigilante and state militia

groups waged campaigns of violence towards Indigenous peoples resulting in murder, mutilation, rape, kidnapping, and enslavement (Trafzer and Hyer). Settlers traveled the land, stealing Indigenous children, killing their parents if they got in the way, transporting said children out of the area, and finally selling them to interested buyers. Some parts of the state saw the creation of plantations whose labor force was comprised of enslaved Indigenous people with children working as domestic labor and adults as farmhands (Akins and Bauer; Magliari; Norton *Genocide in Northwestern California*).

Previous declines in Indigenous populations help illustrate the massive loss of life that followed California's statehood. Between 1769 and 1846 Indigenous people weathered a "devastating demographic decline," under the regimes of colonial missionaries and soldiers who enslaved and abused Indigenous peoples from San Diego to Santa Rosa under the pretense of saving their souls from damnation. Before the Mission Period the Indigenous population sat somewhere between 300,000 and 1 million people. By the end of the Mission Period, this number had dropped to under 250,000 (Hurtado; Johnson-Dodd; Lindsay; Norton *Genocide in Northwestern California*). This is a horrendous decline that is almost dwarfed, at least in terms of deaths per year, when compared to the ethnic cleansing that occurred during the decades following the discovery of gold in California: "By 1870, an estimated thirty thousand Indians were living in the entire state. But by 1910, only seventeen thousand were recorded in the national census [as living in California]," (Norton *Genocide in Northwestern California* 108).

Indigenous peoples whose lands held rich gold deposits were attacked on all fronts. Their territories were rapidly impinged upon by “vigilante type paramilitary,” (Castillo; Johnson-Dodd) groups whose aim was the ethnic cleansing of the newly “Americanized” lands in the name of modernity and resource extraction. Conservative estimates mark the Indigenous population of California somewhere between 100,000 and 150,000 people in 1849.<sup>2</sup> By 1851 that number had been reduced by two-thirds. This vast and rapid decline was due to the mass murder of Indigenous peoples at the hands of invading settlers. This terrifying decline in population came on the heels of another, slower, yet still barbaric, reduction in population overseen by the Mission system created by the Spaniard colonial apparatus, and the Mexican government who inherited the Missions following their independence from Spain (Johnson-Dodd; Lindsay; Madley).

Indigenous peoples in California were overseen by a political apparatus shaped by colonial concepts of white supremacy, modernity, and commodification. Legal frameworks for overseeing Indigenous peoples were shaped by these attitudes in ways that were condescending and patronizing at best and genocidal at their worst. The Act, mentioned above, was only the beginning of lawmakers’ efforts to systematically disenfranchise Indigenous peoples and undermine Native efforts to continue their lifeways and protect their families. Amendments to the Act were consistently made in the

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<sup>2</sup> The actual Indigenous population of California in 1849 is difficult to determine. It is generally agreed that the number of Indigenous people living in the state in 1851 had decreased by at least two-thirds since the beginning of the Gold Rush.

interests of settler populations, to the detriment of Indigenous peoples (California; Johnson-Dodd).

The Act created a legal framework for white supremacy in California. Indigenous peoples were not allowed to vote in elections, were prohibited from providing evidence in court “in favor of, or against, any white person,” and were designated according to pseudoscientific concepts of race. According to an 1851 statute, “Indians,” were those “having one fourth or more Indian blood.” According to the Act of 1850 and later amendments, Indigenous people had few legal rights - the realities experienced by Indigenous people were even more egregiously inequitable than the legislation would suggest (California; Johnson-Dodd).

California’s State Constitution dictated the election and jurisdictions of Justices of the Peace. Initially, Justices of the Peace “for Indians,” were to be elected by the Indigenous populations that lived in their jurisdictions. This component of the Constitution was removed before it was enacted resulting in Justices elected by white settler populations having legal oversight of Indigenous communities throughout California. These Justices were responsible for governing and protecting Indigenous peoples according to the Act. Governing and protecting meant ensuring the continued removal of Indigenous peoples from their aboriginal lands, the separation of children from their “families, languages, and cultures,” and the “apprenticing,” of Indigenous people throughout the state. In this context “apprenticing,” is easily interchanged with indentured or enslaved work – Indigenous people were often imprisoned under vagrancy laws that were used as justification for kidnapping, and enslavement.

As time progressed, the Act was amended to make its implementation and enforcement even more bent towards the interests of settlers hungry for Indigenous land. The above-mentioned vagrancy laws were implemented according to the testimony of any white resident of a given county. This meant that a white person could go before a Justice of the Peace and claim that they witnessed “vagrancy,” on the part of an Indigenous person. Vagrancy could mean anything from not working a verifiable job for a white settler to simply being in the proximity of a white person at the wrong time. Vagrancy was punishable by indenture. Many settlers accused Indigenous people of vagrancy who they wanted to enslave for their own labor interests or to sell to white landowners (Johnson-Dodd; Norton *Genocide in Northwestern California*; "To Destroy in Whole or in Part;" Trafzer and Hyer).

Indigenous indenture was often the outcome of racialized violence perpetrated by white settlers. Slave traders would round up Indigenous children, sometimes killing their parents or family members if they intervened, take them before a Justice of the Peace, and once cleared by the Justice, would remove the children to other counties where they were less likely to be pursued by loved ones. This was a legal process for child kidnapping and enslavement. Once far enough away from their homes, indentured children were sold to white settlers for several purposes. They were used as laborers on farms, in mines, and in households. These events are well documented in newspapers and court documents from the time and indicate settlers’ desire to eradicate Indigenous populations by removing their children from their territories and undermining their

cultural identities by forcing them to behave according to settler norms (Lindsay; Norton “To Destroy in Whole or in Part”).

While much of the Act was written to police and destroy Indigenous bodies, there are components of the legislation that target Indigenous lifeways and, more specifically, cultural burning. Section 10 of the Act criminalized the burning of grasslands. This exemplifies the State’s interest in maintaining land and resources for settler interests – the legislature wanted to protect grazing lands for ranchers and herders. The Section exemplifies the prioritization of settler needs and the new State’s first efforts to stop Indigenous populations from continuing their culturally informed tending practices (California).

#### Settler Violence - State-Mandated Genocide of Indigenous Peoples

California laws were disastrous for Indigenous peoples but the settlers themselves were the driving force of Indigenous murder throughout the new state. Cities were by no means safe havens for Indigenous people, as is evident from stories describing settler violence before and after the adoption of California into the union,(Akins and Bauer) but many settlers were enabled to organize and implement campaigns of annihilation on Indigenous peoples throughout the Klamath Basin and neighboring counties where those who opposed violence towards Native populations were less likely to intervene on Native people’s behalf for logistical and political reasons. State-sanctioned militias were organized in settler communities throughout the state. These groups were responsible for

the deaths of untold numbers of Indigenous people and operated both within and without the limits of the law with few, if any, circumstances for those perpetrating violence.

Militias committing genocide operated within the law and were funded by the state. In addition to the California Constitution's *Act for the Government and Protection of Indians* was *An Act concerning Volunteer and Independent Companies* and *An Act concerning the organization of the Militia*. The *Volunteer Act* dictated the creation of county-based volunteer companies who were enabled to organize and arm themselves according to military standards maintained by the armed forces of the United States. The lengthier, and more detailed, *Militia Act* described military authorities as maintained by the State of California. It established the "organization, ranks, rules, duties, and commutation fees (fees in lieu of service) that governed state military service." (Johnson-Dodd) Under the *Militia Act*, those residing in the state who were "free, white, able-bodied male citizens, between the ages of eighteen and forty-five years," were viable for conscription into the state militia (Johnson-Dodd).

The Governor of California acted as the "commander in chief of all the forces in the state," and the state legislature was responsible for electing the militia's leadership (i.e. Generals, Quarter Master, etc.). Officers were also commissioned by the Governor and county Sheriffs oversaw the gathering of the enrolled militia once ordered. The State Treasurer paid militia members for service as well as for expenses during service (Johnson-Dodd) .

Militias were organized according to state law but were called to service according to various criteria. In terms of organizing militias to attack Indigenous

populations, settlers often fabricated reasons for collectively assaulting Indigenous peoples. Justifications for violence were often imbued with white supremacist rhetoric rooted in logics of erasure and Indigenous dispossession. Settlers demanded that Indigenous peoples submit to settlement by disarming, staying in confined places, and enduring sexual violence, torture, and murder. If Indigenous people attempted to protect themselves, their loved ones or their neighbors, they ran the risk of rapidly escalated settler violence, often at the hands of county militias. They were expected to endure settler violence or see a disproportionate escalation of violence in turn (Lindsay; Norton *Genocide in Northwestern California*; Trafzer and Hyer).

An oft-applied tactic amongst militia groups was using a perceived slight on the part of an Indigenous individual to justify “wars,” against entire populations within a given region. The Red Cap Wars of the Klamath Basin are an excellent example of the disproportionate escalations engineered by settler militias seeking justification for wholesale murder. The War began after a settler attempted to rape a Karuk woman and grievously wounded a Karuk man who tried to intervene. Karuk people killed an ox thought to be owned by the settler. When they learned that they had targeted the wrong individual, they sought to financially reconcile with the ox’s owner. Instead of attempting to make a peaceable end to the conflict, settlers organized a militia that attacked Indigenous people throughout the region regardless of their relation to the events initially used to justify settler violence or their tribal affiliations (Madley; Norton *Genocide in Northwestern California*).

As noted by Hupa scholar Jack Norton in his foundational analysis of the genocide of Indigenous peoples in California, *Genocide in Northwestern California*, “whites did not confine their attacks to retaliation against Indian actions. Their ignorance and paranoia often became a stimulus for committing acts of mass murder,” (Norton *Genocide in Northwestern California*). Tales of “precautionary” murder were told by settlers throughout Northern California. Settlers set ultimatums, in the case of the Red Cap War of 1852, all Karuk were told to relinquish their guns by a given date. Once the date had passed, settlers engineered several attacks on Karuk people under the assumption that their victims had either surrendered their arms or were deserving of whatever punishment was unleashed upon them for having failed to comply. After making the demand that Karuk people disarm, gold miners went to set fire to Karuk and Yurok villages, were fired upon by people defending their homes, and then used Indigenous self-defensive to justify an escalation in violence that resulted in a more long-term escalation in violence and bloodshed (Norton *Genocide in Northwestern California*).

The Red Cap War was one of several large conflicts imposed on Karuk people by the evolving settler regime in Northern California. The so-called Klamath and Humboldt Expeditions that followed the Red Cap conflict were initiated by gold miners and other settlers under the conflated threat of violence by Indigenous populations. As described in Benjamin Madley’s *An American Genocide*, settlers were “well-versed in camouflaging genocidal operations with the rhetoric of a just war,” and used Indigenous resistance to “unprovoked attacks to launch wider, state-sponsored killing campaigns,” (Madley).

The Klamath and Humboldt Expeditions were another set of “thinly veiled annihilation campaign[s].” Five volunteer militias were raised in Humboldt and Siskiyou counties totaling 234 men. Militias raised for the Klamath and Humboldt Expeditions were reimbursed over \$90,000 by the Federal Government. They were organized by the state of California but supplied by the Federal Government. This instance of federal funding of state-organized death squads is indicative of both regional and national attitudes and policies aimed at the annihilation of Indigenous peoples and the absorption of their lands into the national apparatus (Johnson-Dodd). These groups sought the “‘indiscriminate massacre of all the Indians,’ in the Klamath watershed,” and moved from village to village shooting and burning as they went. Even after the initial waves of militia violence wound down in the first months of 1855, settlers continued to hunt Indigenous people throughout the region. Only the intervention of federal troops was enough to slow the killing but the officers in charge of negotiating peace met with tribal leaders while sending bounty hunters to murder or capture other Indigenous people deemed a risk to settler dominance. The army dismissed the militias only to adapt the strategy of genocide to include diplomatic negotiations in addition to widespread vigilante violence. This was done to better control Indigenous survivors of the initial militia campaigns and to whitewash the governments involvement and financial backing of genocide throughout the region. Those survivors were then pushed onto newly created reservations where starvation and disease served the genocidal intent of the settler state (Norgaard *Salmon and Acorns*).

Next, the state attempted to force the Karuk who survived these waves of state funded genocidal settler violence onto the Hoopa Valley Reservation. The Reservation was not the haven from settler abuses that government officials claimed and was not within the bounds of Karuk aboriginal territory. It was comprised of the Hupa people's lands and while Hupa and Karuk people had lived as neighbors, traded goods, and intermarried since time immemorial, the forced relocation of the region's diverse Indigenous peoples onto Hupa land was not well received by Karuk, Hupa, or other groups expected to live there (Norgaard *Salmon and Acorns*).

California's newly established reservation system was yet another mechanism of Indigenous dispossession and genocide created by a state whose legislature was wary of continuing the outright destruction of Indigenous peoples. The reservations were created according to settler white supremacist rhetoric that relied on the belief that Indigenous peoples were doomed to disappear either by outright murder or via the inevitable integration of their populations into settler society. Reservations were not gifts from the federal government but were closer to concentration camps created to encircle Indigenous populations. They were established as spaces for "civilizing," Indigenous peoples at any cost and served the settler interests of land theft and Indigenous erasure. The Karuk Tribe, for better or worse, would not be allocated reservation lands: their claim to land has been refused by the settler state (Norgaard *Salmon and Acorns*).

## Land Theft

Violence towards Karuk people and other Indigenous peoples throughout the Klamath Basin and Northern California was propelled by several factors. White supremacy and modernity were discursive tools used to justify genocidal campaigns perpetrated against Indigenous peoples, but the fundamental driver of violence was the settler hunger for Indigenous land and the resources it contained. Violence was one of several settler tools for Indigenous displacement and institutionalized land theft. As time progressed under the Californian settler regime, it became clear that Indigenous people were not going to disappear or leave their lands. While continually enacting campaigns of genocidal violence, the State of California began to formulate and implement other modes of displacement. Treaty negotiations, campaigns of displacement, and genocidal violence occurred simultaneously. The forced removal of Indigenous peoples from their lands and forced relocation to reservations was simply one component in the wholesale theft of Indigenous land and the resources it contained.

Between 1851 and 1852 eighteen tribes in California signed treaties with the Federal Government. The Karuk signed treaties with the Redick McKee senate delegation in 1851 in Weitchpec, Somes Bar, and near the confluence of the Scott and Klamath Rivers in Siskiyou County. These treaties included agreements to create reservations for the Karuk Tribe and provide compensation for lands subsumed by the state (Heizer). Due to political and economic motivations, as well as systemic racism towards Indigenous peoples, the United States Senate failed to ratify treaties with Indigenous peoples in

California due to the inherent value of Indigenous lands thereby dispossessing Karuk and other Indigenous peoples of their homelands while incorporating their populations and lands under federal sovereignty. The 1.38 million acres that make up Karuk territorial homelands were stolen by the Federal Government to be overseen, eventually, by the United States National Forest Service. The Karuk people never received a reservation and have been forced to slowly reacquire their aboriginal territories by buying it back in small portions (Norgaard *Salmon and Acorns Feed Our People*; Vinyeta).

The establishment of reservations, and the later allotment system, were implemented to drive Indigenous peoples onto ever shrinking and unproductive pieces of land, often under the threat of escalated violence. Instead of being relocated to a reservation within their own territories according to the treaties described above, the Karuk people were ordered to leave their aboriginal homes and move to the Hoopa Valley Indian Reservation, the same year it was created, in 1864. Reservations were often located on “nearly worthless land,” acquired by superintendents whose job was to oversee the running of what were, at the time, essentially concentration camps for Indigenous peoples. Regardless of their traditional territories, or historical relations with other Indigenous groups also forced onto the reservation, Indigenous populations were ordered to move to reservations or continue to face the threat of unfettered settler violence. It is worth noting that the order to move to Hoopa Valley came at a time when the state of California continued to pay bounties for the scalps of Indigenous people – Karuk people lived in a state of constant duress and existential threat. Moving to a reservation might have been the lesser of many evils faced by Karuk people and their

neighbors. Unfortunately, reservations were often overseen by corrupt settlers who did little to protect the wellbeing of Indigenous people and often spent funds allocated for Indigenous needs on various for-profit settler ventures (Lindsay).

Newspapers and magazines from the 1850s and 1860s illustrate some of what occurred on the reservations in the Klamath Basin and others throughout the state. Food bought to support uprooted Indigenous peoples was either given to settlers, sold for profit, or withheld from “those who did not labor.” The wanton destruction of traditional food sources at the hands of settlers further contributed to food scarcity amongst Indigenous communities who were often forcefully moved far distances from their homelands. According to Brendan C. Lindsay in *Murder State*, “the resultant starvation,” from these settler-created factors “had a domino effect,” for Indigenous peoples in Northern California. Starving and displaced Indigenous people were more prone to diseases introduced by settlers, less able to resist settler abuses, and struggled to maintain their cultural traditions. Reservations, in their earliest iteration in California, were another settler construct, like the various legal frameworks described above, created to destroy indigeneity in California under the pretense of protecting the wellbeing of Indigenous peoples (Lindsay, Trafzer and Hyer).

Though not quite the romanticized, tragic tale of the destruction of the buffalo and the genocidal results to the Indigenous population of the Great Plains, nonetheless the destruction of the elk herds, rattlesnakes, rabbits, acorns, and other flora and fauna had no less devastating a consequence for California’s Indigenous population. Those not perishing slowly by starvation or disease on reservations sometimes died by violence... Browne [note: a federal agent assigned to investigate realities on California’s new reservations] argued, “What neglect, starvation, and disease have not done, has been achieved by the co-operation of American settlers in the great work of extermination.” (Lindsay)

Karuk people had long relied on acorns and salmon as fundamental components of their diets. Just as the buffalo were eradicated to the immediate detriment of Indigenous peoples on the plains, so were salmon systematically targeted as a commodity for reckless extraction. Canneries near the mouth of the Klamath River, in neighboring Yurok territory, expedited the harvest of massive quantities of salmon for settler consumption. Some of the first dams installed by settlers on the Klamath River were mounted with baskets to catch salmon migrating to their spawning grounds. Salmon were seen as a valuable commodity that could be used to settler's advantage while undermining the needs of Indigenous populations in the region. Later fishing laws limited Indigenous access to their most important and historically predictable source of protein and hydroelectric dams installed during the 20<sup>th</sup> century pushed many salmon species to the brink of extinction. Before 1850, an average Karuk person ate around 400 pounds of salmon per year. In 2010, just 160 years later, most Karuk ate 5 pounds of salmon per year (Norgaard "The Effects of Altered Diet on the Health of the Karuk People"). This dramatic decrease indicates the interruption of ecological relationships maintained by Karuk people before settler invasion and genocide and marks another outcome of settler commodification and resource extraction of components of the natural world that have historically supported Karuk lifeways (Hamilton & Curtis, et al.; Hamilton & Rondorf, et al.; Most; Norgaard *Salmon and Acorns Feed Our People*).

Being forced onto reservation lands outside of their aboriginal territories under threat of violence or death was yet another disastrous component of the ongoing genocide

of Karuk people. When they were finally legally allowed to leave the reservation in Hoopa Valley, Karuk people's ability to return to their homes and reengage in the land and resource tending processes that they had utilized since time immemorial was restricted in the best cases and made impossible in most. Many of their homes had been destroyed by settlers and much of the landscape they inhabited and interacted with had been or was in the process of being ravaged by mining ventures and other settler resource extraction endeavors. Most of their territory was policed by the U.S. Forest Service who forbid their living on and tending of their homelands. Their claim to land was essentially nullified according to the settler legal system and settler concepts of ownership. Some Karuk received "surplus," lands from the state but their ability to tend even these small parcels was limited by the legal and extralegal interventions of settlers and the settler state. This tenuous hold on small parcels was undermined by another iteration of legalized land theft in 1887 that sought to further impose settler logics of land and property ownership onto peoples who had very different understandings of personal property and space (Norgaard, Reed and Van Horn; Norgaard *Salmon and Acorns Feed Our People*).

The Dawes Act, also known as the General Allotment Act, of 1887 was implemented by the Federal Government to force Indigenous people to be itinerant farmers and to, yet again, expedite the control of their territories into the hands of settler populations. Under the Dawes Act, Karuk people were allocated small plots of land which could be sold to settlers and whose residents could be evicted by the federal government. Indigenous people who received title to plots in this fashion were expected

to use the land to make money to integrate into the settler market economy more rapidly. The land was a mechanism by which the settler state attempted to foist capitalist values and expectations onto Indigenous peoples who had utilized very different economic systems before the settler invasion (Norgaard, Reed and Van Horn).

The Dawes Act is widely recognized for its attempt to establish the European system of private ownership on Indian lands. Here, non-Indian conceptions of land ownership are codified into laws which together with racialized rhetoric and ideology become the vehicle for the transfer of land from Indian into white hands. The Dawes Act was designed to break up tribal land and divide it among individuals: “It was hoped that initiating Indians to the concept of private land ownership would aid in integrating them into white society” (Delaney 1981, 2). **Because the Karuk people did not have a reservation and were then living on lands claimed by the U.S. Forest Service, the 1910 amendment of the Dawes Act to include forest lands was particularly significant** (Delaney 1981). Through this racial project, resources were diverted from Indian to non-Indian hands and land management practices shifted from activities geared toward food production to those that would achieve profits under capitalism (timber and farming). (Norgaard, Reed & Van Horn)

Karuk people not having their own reservation had important outcomes for their populations when the Dawes Act was passed. Many Karuk were living on forest lands that the Dawes Act incorporated into allotments. These allotments were not necessarily provided to the individuals or groups who had been living on and tending them and thus, their being redistributed acted as another interruption of Karuk access to their land and the ecological systems they had established in those spaces (Norgaard *Salmon and Acorns Feed Our People*).

Allotment was not an opportunity for Karuk people to reclaim their homelands but represented another method for dispossession and systemic marginalization. It served to funnel Indigenous lands into settler control under the guise of progress and modernity:

“The allotment policy had attached like a cancer to the Indians’ lands. As a result of “the allotment system and its attendant evils,” Indians had lost some 63 million acres, or almost two-thirds of all the area remaining in their possession in 1887,” (Catton). After waves of settler genocide, being forcibly removed from their land via a myriad number of settler legal mechanisms and enduring the long-term theft of those homelands by the settler state, Karuk people and their interdependent relationships with the ecosystems they had relied on and intimately shaped was fractured yet again by the allotment system dictated by the Dawes Act. These modes of dispossession and genocide are some of the more immediately identifiable conditions endured by Karuk people in the decades following California’s statehood and the surge of gold-hungry settlers to the Klamath Basin. To better understand the continuation of dispossession and genocide endured by Karuk people after the Dawes Act of 1887, through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and to the modern day, we must understand the various land and resource management regimes used by the settler state in their various attempts to commodify and profit from Karuk land.

#### Fire Suppression and the National Forest as Occupying Force

The United States National Forest Service occupied Karuk traditional territory to transform the landscape into various profit-producing systems. Forest Service occupation began as soon as the organization was created in 1905. Timber production was and continues to be a profitable endeavor for the Forest Service. In 1850, during the greed-fueled settler invasion of California, “lumber production ranked first among all U.S. manufactures,” (Catton). As more and more settlers moved to California and other

western states, isolated logging camps were constructed throughout Indigenous peoples' homelands. These camps served as conduits for extraction of resources and wealth for the benefit of settlers and at the expense of Indigenous peoples who had carefully tended large portions of the landscapes they inhabited. According to the logics of the settler state and the capitalist economic system it depends on, forests are not habitats or homes but are "an economic resource to be managed efficiently and profitably," (Scott). These values ran in stark contrast to those maintained by Karuk people who believe that the natural world is their home and that they have a fundamental responsibility to care for it.

The Forest Service was formed under President Theodore Roosevelt in 1905 to provide a policing agency for the National Forest System. It was established as a branch of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Its placement under this authority indicates the role expected of National Forest lands: production of marketable products – timber. Upon its creation, the National Forest system incorporated massive swaths of public lands that had been maintained as "forest reserves." These lands included Karuk territories and the territories of many other Indigenous peoples in the region and elsewhere. Its creation established the National Forest as the overseer of huge quantities of Indigenous lands with the Forest Service acting as the policing agency of the Indigenous peoples who lived on them (Hirt; Catton).

The state's valuation of natural spaces is informed by a desire to maximize profits from the growth and harvest of specific species of trees. The growth of various softwoods has been prioritized by the Forest Service due to their viability as timber. Softwoods tend to grow faster and straighter than hardwoods. These features are desirable in terms of

efficient production, harvest, and commodification. Softwood trees were systematically controlled via Indigenous peoples' use of cultural fire. Due to Indigenous peoples' prioritizing the care of certain kinds of trees and forests around their homes, many softwood species were predominantly found in less-frequently utilized Indigenous spaces. When the Forest Service occupied Karuk lands, they sought to alter their ecosystems to produce more board feet of marketable timber. The Forest Service saw the use of cultural fire as a threat to their production of timber and, like other settler governmental bodies before it, sought to stop its use by any means necessary (McCovey).

The instrument, the knife, that carved out the new, rudimentary forest was the razor-sharp interest in the production of a single commodity. Everything that interfered with the efficient production of the key commodity implacably eliminated. Everything that seemed unrelated to efficient production was ignored. Having come to see the forest as a commodity, scientific forestry set about refashioning it as a commodity machine. (Scott)

Scott describes the creation of scientific forestry and its relationship with nationalized forest lands, as resulting in the "refashioning," of forests into "commodity machine[s]." This transformation provided the impetus for fire suppression to become a central component of the management of National Forest lands and the desecration of Indigenous spaces. The pursuit of marketable commodities, namely timber, drove the philosophy of forestry to focus of highly specialized, dangerously narrow ideas of what forests could and should produce. They were not ecosystems rich with interconnected ecologies but were spaces in which productivity could be maximized for extractive economic gain (Hirt; Scott).

Settler land management regimes were given wider-reaching authority in terms of fire suppression and the policing of Indigenous lands with the formation of the United States Forest Service. This process began with the creation of the National Forest System via the Land Revision Act of 1891 and the actual creation of the United States Forest Service as a division of the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 1905 (Catton).

Fire suppression and the criminalization of cultural fire were weaponized towards Indigenous populations throughout California to protect extractive interests and attack Indigenous wellbeing. These land management practices further undermined the interests of Karuk people seeking to feed themselves, generate culturally significant materials, and participate in the renewal of the world. As mentioned earlier in this thesis, fire suppression was written into the earliest iterations of California's state constitution. That generation of fire suppression legislation was more aimed at stopping Indigenous people from burning grasslands desired by settlers for grazing but fire suppression in woodlands and forests was quickly adopted as a method for settler society to impose its will onto Indigenous peoples and lands.

Shepherders and cattlemen learned about burning from Indians... and up through the early 1900s they lit fires to keep meadows open and keep down the brush in the forest understories... Timbermen also set fires in forest understories to reduce hazardous fuels and brush. Around the turn of the century, however, many Forest Service officials began to oppose deliberate burning and to argue for the suppression of all fires. They viewed lightning-caused and Indian-set fires as inherently destructive, with no ecological role in forest or grassland development and maintenance. It was thought that all fires threatened valuable tree resources, protective watershed cover and wildlife. (Anderson)

The federal government became increasingly concerned with acquiring and controlling public lands in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The popularity of conservation rhetoric helped propel the writing and implementation of laws concerned with land and resource management throughout the United States. Conservation and preservation rhetoric rely on the concept that certain people know how to use and protect land. White supremacy intertwines with conservation in several ways, mainly being that those certain people are white. According to conservation rhetoric, white people must protect, conserve, natural spaces for the betterment of society and to ensure white access to those spaces. The very concept of “wilderness,” is imbued with white-supremacist ideology and intent – it “is the product of a worldview alien to Indigenous peoples whose homes are the very places the term is so emphatically attached to,”(Bacon). Using settler colonial analysis, we can understand how conservation rhetoric is used to justify the removal and destruction of Indigeneity. The concept of conservation is inherently linked to genocidal attitudes and policies that shape land and resource management regimes at the expense of Indigenous access and lifeways (Powell; Wolfe).

The Forest Service was given greater acquisition power and fire suppression authority under the Weeks Act of 1911. The Weeks Act authorized the largescale purchasing of land by the Federal Government, funded the acquisition of vast tracks of land for the formation of National Parks in eastern states and provided financial incentives for state and regional fire suppression partnerships with the Forest Service. The Weeks Act is a foundational piece of legislature in the settler fire suppression regime imposed upon Karuk people and their Indigenous neighbors in the Klamath Basin. It

criminalized cultural burning on a federal level and “provided for matching funds and agreements between the Forest Service and state foresters to expand fire protection on public and private lands.” It was created with the explicit goal of stamping out cultural fire and prescribed fire in order to ensure timber productivity (Anderson; Pyne *Between Two Fires*; Tribe).

The Clark-McNary Act, passed in 1924, expanded upon existing cooperative firefighting and fire suppression programs maintained between federal and state institutions. The Weeks and Clark-McNary Acts served to promote fire suppression as the only way to engage fire on landscapes and served as foundational legislation for the creation of a “paramilitary-like program to quickly stamp out wildfires through the rapid mobilization of firefighters, equipment, and technology.” These developments marked yet another incursion into Karuk traditional territories and an attempt to eradicate tending methodologies depended upon by Karuk people in their reciprocal relationships with the spaces they continued to fight to inhabit (Anderson; Norgaard *Salmon and Acorns Feed Our People*; Pyne *California: A Fire Survey*).

An anthropomorphized bear in ranger uniform has played an influential role in the normalization of the militarized fire suppression regime so rigidly imposed by the federal government. Smokey the Bear is recognizable to most Americans and stands as a stark reminder of the ways that nationalism is imbued within fire suppression ethos: “This shameful waste WEAKENS AMERICA! Remember – Only you can PREVENT THE MADNESS!” Smokey served as a Forest Service mascot for fire suppression whose purpose was to teach people about the importance of keeping fire off the land by

associating fire suppression with national responsibility and good citizenship. He exemplifies settler attitudes towards land-as-resource and played an important role in spreading powerful propaganda for nationalized fire suppression interests (Norgaard *Salmon and Acorns Feed Our People*; Ad Council).

The nationalization of public lands cemented the theft of Karuk land within a nation-wide system of dispossession. The commodification of that land and the resources it contained contributed to Karuk marginalization and the criminalization of Karuk access to land and cultural burning had dire consequences for the Karuk people and their homelands. Criminalization of Karuk lifeways made it so Karuk people who wanted to remain on their aboriginal territory were essentially outlaws to the settler state. These elements, combined with evolving fire suppression and land management regimes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, led to the ongoing erosion of Karuk access to land and cultural practices dependent on that access. The Slater Fire of 2020 was a direct outcome of Karuk people and their lifeways being attacked by the settler regime according to the logics of capital, the state, and colonial expansion. The next chapter will examine the more recent events that led to the fire and its nightmarish outcomes for Karuk people in the Klamath Basin.

### CHAPTER 3: THE SLATER FIRE AS A MECHANISM OF GENOCIDE

The Slater Fire of 2020 began during a windstorm on September 8, 2020.

According to ongoing court cases, the fire was started when a power line, owned and operated by PacifiCorp<sup>3</sup>, fell onto a tree. Two days after ignition, two firefighters had died to the blaze that had swept towards the town of Happy Camp. By the time the fire was declared contained, over two months later, nearly 200 homes had been destroyed. Over 157,000 acres of forest were ravaged by the conflagration. That land represents a large portion of Karuk traditional territory and encompasses an entire watershed, so-called Indian Creek, that was traditionally tended by Karuk people since time immemorial.

During the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Karuk people endured waves of genocide and dispossession at the hands of settler populations enabled by the laws of the State of California. Their population dropped by as much as two-thirds over a very short period due to state-sanctioned murder and repeated displacement. Their lands were stolen and twisted into commodification machines, their culture was criminalized, and their claims to territory ignored. The creation of the National Forest system was yet another layer of violence perpetrated against Karuk communities. Fire suppression methods and

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<sup>3</sup> PacifiCorp owns and operates hydroelectric dams on the Klamath River that have dramatically impacted the River's salmon populations. Hydroelectric dam installation began during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and dramatically limited the ability of Indigenous people of the Klamath Basin to acquire enough fish to support their traditional diets. Norgaard, Reed, and Van Horn's "A Continuing Legacy: Institutional Racism, Hunger, and Nutritional Justice on the Klamath." MIT press, 2011 is an excellent examination of the outcomes of dam construction.

the nationalization of their traditional territories serve as settler colonial tools of land theft and Indigenous erasure.

The Forest Service is the most immediate settler authority Karuk people are forced to interact with in the pursuit of cultural continuity. After its creation in 1905, it became the arbiter of Karuk access to land and continues to police their attempts to tend the land and resources that their cultural survival depends upon. The Forest Service is a modern manifestation of the genocidal intent of the settler state and plays a critical role in the continued oppression of Karuk people and their Indigenous neighbors. Its reliance on settler colonial logics in promoting fire suppression illustrates the Forest Service's role as "an eco-social structure, which produces/maintains drastic and enduring inequalities between settlers and Native peoples," producing what JM Bacon calls "colonial ecological violence," (Bacon). As stated by Leaf Hillman, Karuk cultural practitioner and spiritual leader,

Every project plan, every regulation, rule, or policy that the United States Forest Service adopts, and implements is an overt act of hostility against the Karuk People and represents a continuation of the genocidal practices and policies of the US government directed at the Karuk for the last 150 years. This is because every one of their acts – either by design or otherwise – has the effect of creating barriers between Karuks and their land. (Norgaard *Salmon and Acorns Feed Our People*)

According to Hillman and others, the outcomes of Forest Service occupation of Karuk homelands are to the detriment of Karuk cultural health and collective continuance (Whyte "Settler Colonialism, Ecology, and Environmental Injustice"). The Forest Service stops Karuk people from performing tasks essential to their culture such as tending,

gathering, hunting, and burning and limits their access to spaces historically maintained by Karuk people until the settler invasion sparked by the absorption of California into the United States of America. By policing Karuk land the Forest Service undermines the interests of Karuk people and the places that Karuk people historically shaped via cultural burning and other tending processes. Forest Service policies and attitudes stand in stark contrast to the culturally informed, reciprocal lifeways traditionally maintained by Karuk people. By criminalizing Karuk lifeways and contributing to the ongoing marginalization of Karuk people, the Forest Service maintains genocidal trajectories first instigated by settler death squads in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (McCovey).

Genocide is not simply the destruction of the bodies of a group of people. Genocidal violence is also defined as cultural destruction (Short). Karuk people have been enduring settler efforts to destroy their culture since the 1800s. These efforts are embodied within Forest Service fire suppression policies, the criminalization of Karuk lifeways, and the institutionalized interruption of culturally informed land-based practices.

The genocide of Karuk people has created environmental conditions that threaten ecological stability throughout the entirety of the Klamath National Forest as well as the regions adjacent to those millions of acres. The relationship between the KNF and the continued marginalization and dispossession of Karuk aboriginal territories are outcomes of settler colonial logics whose aim is the erasure of Indigenous peoples and spaces. Settler colonial analysis provides a framework for illustrating the ways that management regimes are the ideological offspring of genocidal programs unleashed upon Karuk

people in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. To understand the Slater Fire, we need to understand the discursive tools that have created dangerous forest conditions at the expense of Karuk culture (Bacon).

National Forest Service methods and policies have normalized extractive commodification processes in Karuk spaces in attempts to wring capital from the land. Its utilization of fire suppression rhetoric and methods disrupted Karuk land tending and destabilizes the landscape in ways that have made it dangerous for human beings. Disastrous wildfires like the Slater Fire are the direct outcome of disrupting Karuk relationships with their land via genocide and displacement. This chapter will describe the ways that the Klamath National Forest is a mechanism of cultural genocide whose policies and attitudes have resulted in the systematic degradation of Karuk lands and wellbeing.

### The Karuk Tribe and the Klamath National Forest

The Klamath National Forest was initially designated as a forest reserve by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1905. Two years later in 1907, the designation of the land was changed to National Forest. The Forest encapsulates 1.7 million acres that reach from Siskiyou County, California to Jackson County, Oregon. The Klamath, Scott, and Salmon Rivers flow through the Forest. Lower elevations of the Forest are largely made filled with timber plantations planted with various conifer tree species. These systematically commodified spaces were once forested with mixed hardwoods and interspersed with meadows carefully tended via Karuk cultural fire methods as described

in the first chapter of this thesis. Diverse forest landscapes were replaced with timber plantations according to scientific forestry methods first popularized in Europe during the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and imported to the Americas by settler populations whose interests were driven by the accumulation of wealth rather than the production of reciprocal relationships with land (Scott).

At the time of its creation, the Klamath National Forest encapsulated land recently stolen from Karuk people. Karuk people had been hunted, raped, murdered, and driven off the land via numerous legal and extralegal mechanisms in the decades directly before. (California; Trafzer and Hyer; Norton *Genocide in Northwestern California: When Our Worlds Cried*) The domination of their lands under the oversight of the National Forest system was another settler disruption of their cultural relationship with their homelands. It placed a new governmental organization between them and their lands and created a police force for the enforcement of settler management policies that directly undermined Karuk attempts to care for their aboriginal territories and the complex ecologies their tending had created in those spaces (Norgaard *Salmon and Acorns Feed Our People*; Vinyeta).

Conflicts about fire suppression between Indigenous people of the Klamath Basin and the Forest Service are well documented. A letter to the California Fish and Game Commission signed by Klamath River Jack, an Indigenous man from the Basin, illustrates Indigenous concerns and frustrations related to the implementation of fire suppression regimes. Jack described the benefits of cultural fire in terms of ensuring the health and productivity of certain plant species and the maintenance of grazing spaces for

deer. He compared the use of cultural fire to pest control and pruning methods used by settler populations and communicated the importance of burning in maintaining the land. The letter was written in 1916 and references settler laws recently passed that criminalized cultural burning. His frustration is palpable, and he warns that settlers will only realize the folly of their ways when it is “TOO LATE.”<sup>4</sup>

Klamath River Jack’s letter provoked a response from a regional Forest Service Ranger named Jim Casey. It is unclear as to whether Casey’s letter was delivered to Jack or if it was printed in a newspaper or magazine as a skewed op-ed piece designed to patronize Indigenous people and their culturally informed management methods. The Casey letter drips with condescension and seeks to undermine the culturally informed arguments presented in Jack’s correspondence: <sup>5</sup>

We wont get into any college debate and use dictionary words: lets start with the main thing, grub. You eat deer meat, fish and acorns. You want lots of these things, so to keep the supply going you set fire in the woods. They burn over a big country and then next spring you see lots of new shoots on the brush; manzanita, scrub oak, snowbrush and all the rest of them. But you don’t see any shoots on the little pines and firs, do you? No! They are dry and dead; all of them up to twenty feet high. Maybe that don’t mean anything to you because the pine tree ain’t good feed for deer. But I want to tell why it does mean something to you and the deer, too.

...

Not long ago I went over to Frank Long’s to offer him a job on the White Horse Road. Thought I’d make a cut-off to save some time so I rode up the ridge back of Adam’s cabin and figured to cut across Elk Creek Canyon. I was in the open timber all the way until I started down the side of the canyon and run plumb into that long brush field you can see from the river. You know, the one that runs from the Queen Mine flume clear to the top of the mountain. I tried to jam through it but couldn’t make it, so had to ride clear up and around the brush.

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<sup>4</sup> Appendix 1 – Klamath River Jack letters

<sup>5</sup> Appendix 1

Did you ever stop to think what made that brush field? Do you know that all through it there are old black stumps burned clear into the ground? Fire did it. When I asked Frank about it he said that three big fires had run over that place in the last 20 years. Are there any berries in that strip; is there any grass in there; can you hunt in there? No, Jack, because your fire is bad medicine. If that place had been left alone there would be big timber all over it and you could ride anywhere and there would be lots of grass on the ground for deer and cattle.

And, Jack, if your acorns are wormy, don't blame it on the white man keeping fire out of the country – there are a good many other things that keep bugs alive. And I have seen the best kind of acorn crops in places that never felt a fire. Anyway, there are other things that make better flour than acorns; why not plant some grain and vegetables and fruit trees on that flat back of your cabin? That's white man's grub, but its pretty good.

Casey's letter rejects Jack's culturally informed experience. He wrote that Jack was wrong, that fire did not improve the productivity and health of acorns, made the landscape more difficult to navigate, and reduced foraging opportunities for deer. He told Jack to make a garden to produce "white man's grub," and went so far as to say that Jack's fire was "bad medicine." Casey's letter exemplifies less overtly violent settler treatment of Indigenous people that, nonetheless, indicates attitudes of racial superiority wielded by settler populations in the decades after their arrival on Indigenous lands throughout California. His misunderstanding of fire ecology and demeaning attitude serve as useful indicators of how settlers treated and thought about Indigenous people and their cultures. Those patronizing, racist attitudes are still actively shaping the ways that National Forest administrations interact with the Karuk Tribe and have resounding impacts for Karuk people and their lands. There are many studies that undermine Casey's claimed expertise on the subject and illustrate Jack's deep-rooted understanding of cultural fire's importance in his homeland. (Halpern; Lake and Christianson; Marks-Block et al.).

A 1918 letter from a District Ranger serves as another early example of settler attitudes towards cultural burning within the National Forest system. The letter, sent to the District Ranger's supervisor in Yreka, California contains data about the number of "man caused fires," in the area and suggests several reasons that settlers started fires including improving grazing land, opening land for mining ventures, and reducing brush to facilitate easier hunting. The author then described "another source of fires," as "renegade whites and indians in the district." According to his understanding, these people started fires "for pure cussedness," and that the only way to stop such criminals was to "kill them off, every time you catch one sneaking around in the brush like a coyote," (Harley).

These letters demonstrate the ways that early Forest Service employees thought about Indigenous peoples that lived in the districts they policed. They illustrate the ways that settlers and the Forest Service thought about Karuk and other Indigenous peoples as an obstacle to be overcome or destroyed in their pursuit of commodification of Indigenous lands. These letters are excellent examples of the inherent condescension and white supremacist rhetoric imbued within settler institutions and policies. According to those policing Karuk land, Indigenous peoples were not smart enough to properly care for their lands and would either be forced to assimilate into white, settler culture or be killed. These attitudes and rhetoric continue to steer the ways that the United States National Forest interacts with the Karuk Tribe – they are manifest in the policies maintained by the Forest as well as the outcomes for Karuk collective continuance.

The decades between the creation of the National Forest system and the Slater Fire have been marred by the development and implementation of forestry techniques driven by the state's desire for financial gain and enabled by the racist rhetoric described above. During the years between the authoring of the above-described letters and the United States' involvement in World War II in 1941, the Forest Service's "functions primarily involved custodial activities on the national forests: cooperative fire, insect, and disease protection, reforestation, and the promotion of the idea that forests were a 'crop,'" (Hirt).

Up until the 1940s, the timber industry had largely been supplied by private landowners. Private timber holdings had been largely exhausted by the time the US declared war against the Axis powers in 1941. Depleted forests and war-time demand for timber initiated the widespread logging of National Forest lands which was only exacerbated when soldiers returned home after the end of the war in need of housing. Post-war demand for housing propelled vast timber harvest projects throughout the nation. As demand grew, "the Forest Service tried to maximize production to meet... demands... 'Intensive management' was a special phrase... that signified the lavish application of capital, labor, and technology to increase the commercial productivity of forests." These needs and concepts exemplified another wave of settler incursion and extraction on Karuk lands that lasted into the 1960s. Accelerated industrial logging served as another mode of Indigenous dispossession whose outcomes were, and continue to be, disastrous for Karuk culture and its ties to land (Hirt; Scott).

“Intensive management,” further degraded Karuk lands where fire-suppression had already fundamentally transformed the make-up of forests. Hardwood forests long maintained by Karuk cultural burning had been replaced with fir and pine plantations. Clearcutting, in lieu of selective cutting methods, was utilized throughout western states resulting in the rapid ecological speed,” to the detriment of Karuk culture and land. New logging roads crisscrossed Karuk territory further enabling the extraction of timber and allowing more extensive policing of Karuk spaces by Forest Service authorities (Norgaard *Salmon and Acorns Feed Our People*).

The post-war period saw the escalation of destruction of Karuk land. As the state demanded more and more resource extraction on the land it had stolen, fire suppression became even more politicized. The state and various interest groups including the timber industry, ranchers, wildlife managers, and recreationist organizations made increasing demands on the Forest Service. In satisfying the needs of these divergent groups, the Forest Service required funding to build infrastructure such as roads and visitor’s facilities. Timber sales provided funding while propelling ecological destruction. Clearcutting and timber plantations became the norm throughout National Forest lands (Hirt).

These fixtures of federal land management continue to be the bane of Karuk cultural practitioners and are a critical component in the increasing frequency of destructive wildfires. They serve as eco-social weapons wielded by the settler state against the interests of Karuk and other Indigenous peoples (Bacon). They have resulted in the monocropping of public lands wherein once ecologically diverse forests have been

transformed into overgrown softwood plantations. These single-species forests are often overly dense. They are planted and maintained in ways that make them particularly prone to destructive wildfires (Donovan and Brown). Fire suppression has exacerbated these conditions even more, leading to vast swaths of public lands, like those surrounding the town of Happy Camp, being densely overgrown. The ecological outcomes of forest management regimes established in the 1950s began to come to fiery fruition in the 1980s and 90s. Forests that were heavily logged, haphazardly replanted, or not replanted at all, and then mutilated by fire suppression for several decades began to demonstrate their pyrographic potential (Pyne *California: A Fire Survey*; Vinyeta).

The Slater Fire is one outcome of decades of extraction-centered mismanagement coupled with the continued marginalization of Indigenous needs within the National Forest system. The forests that were once carefully tended by Karuk people armed with culturally informed knowledge developed by and passed down through many generations have been abused and neglected well past the breaking point in terms of fire-resilience. Fire managed, spaced-out hardwood forests adjacent to sections of fir and pines also tended with natural ignition and cultural fires were razed and replaced with densely packed, single-species tracts. The condescension inherent in settler attitudes towards Indigenous cultural fire had helped transform the commodity factories into timebombs. Those tracts of forest serve as fuels for destructive megafires that would behave very differently without the implementation of the commodity, extraction obsessed fire suppression regime that has dictated the actions of the National Forest for the last hundred years.

The Karuk Tribe, even without reservation lands on which to practice cultural fire, has been working to stop these processes from continuing to degrade their lands and their cultural continuity. As a Tribal Government whose claim to land and sovereignty is further undermined by the fact that they do not currently have a reservation, the Karuk Tribe must work even harder to ensure that their needs are considered in National Forest management plans. While many neighboring Tribes with reservations have established political, economic, and bureaucratic infrastructure that allows them to negotiate with federal entities on more even ground, the Karuk are forced to constantly negotiate and renegotiate funding, access, and inclusion due to their status as a Tribe without a federally recognized land base.

Due to much of the Tribe's funding coming from grants and dependent on project-based funding models that do not provide long-term funding for Karuk cultural goals. The tribe is forced to constantly seek outside funding for their management efforts whereas some other tribes in the region benefit from the political and economic influences of possessing reservation lands. Unratified treaties and the allotment system described in Chapter 2 of this thesis served settler interests of severing Karuk legal claim to their lands. Their lack of reservation lands and resulting exacerbated marginalization continue to maintain unequal power dynamics that undergird the relationship between the Tribe and the Klamath National Forest (H.C.F.S. Council).

In recent decades the Karuk Tribe, often in partnership with regional non-governmental organizations and local fire-safe councils, has submitted fuels reduction proposals to the National Forest administrations that occupy their lands. Community

Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPP) are created by many fire-prone communities to address concerns related to wildfire and land management in and around towns and private property. They serve as an opportunity for community organizations and individuals to interact with land management entities such as the National Forest in the promotion of community interests. In the case of the Happy Camp CWPP, the document illustrates the importance of reducing fuels around Karuk homes and populations to protect the interests of residents, Indigenous and settler, and to support the cultural interests of the Karuk people. The plan is described by its creators and editors as a living document to be adapted according to the changing needs of the community (H.C.F.S. Council). This iteration of the plan, written to address the build-up of dangerous understory fuels on Karuk lands occupied by the National Forest, was presented to KNF.

The main goals of the plan were to:

- Reintroduce fire in the environment through wildland fire managed for resource benefits and prescribed fire, where Forest ecosystems evolved under the influence of wildfires.
- Reduce unacceptable fuel buildups and potential acreage of future high intensity wildfires.
- Use the appropriate minimum impact suppression methods to control wildfires.
- Develop management and protection strategies for inter-mixed State responsibility and private forest lands. (H.C.F.S. Council)

It is unclear whether the KNF signed the document. Its signing would not have ensured any kind of action either way – the plan is a loose agreement to address fuels reduction that lacks any legally binding component. What is clear is that the fuels reduction proposal that the most recent CWPP contained was not implemented. Each of

the goals described above were ignored by KNF. The proposal was generated via collaboration between the Tribe and numerous community stakeholders over a period of several years and, at least partially, in response to wildfires that had threatened the town of Happy Camp. This failure to act on the repeated requests of the Tribe and Happy Camp community at large are indicative of the Forest Service administration's attitude towards the Karuk people as a whole and the Forest Service's prioritization of timber production over community safety.

Additionally, it is unclear why the KNF refused to participate in the proposed fuels reduction plans submitted by the Firesafe Council in coordination with the Tribe. There was no attempt at large scale fuels reduction by the KNF around Happy Camp in the years and months before the Slater Fire destroyed 200 homes and tens of thousands of acres of forest in the summer of 2020. Its failure to act is rooted in several contemporary conditions linked to the historical and ongoing abuse of Karuk people and lands. Community members, Karuk Tribal members, and a retired Forest Service employee with firsthand knowledge of the KNF believe that the problematic relationship between the KNF and the Karuk Tribe is related to its continued focus on timber harvest, hiring policies implemented by the Forest Service, its refusal to negotiate with NGOs and non-profits working in collaboration with the Tribe, and fire suppression continuing to be the primary mode of fire management utilized by the Forest.

## Slater Butte Before the Fire

Far from an aberration, the Slater Fire as Leaf Hillman explains, was a product of history:

“...it's all about the history of those landscapes as well. When you talk about the Slater fire... there's a history behind it. And the cause and effect and what happened, Slater fire and the most tragic parts of it - 150 homes loss and some people losing their lives. That one there for me, it's like first thing that flashes in my mind is... Slater Butte where that fire started. From there, to where the first house got torched several hours later. That landscape right there, in between those two places, point A (where the fire started) and point B (where it started to burn homes) - let's look at the history of that landscape. It's a landscape that was managed for 1000s of years by Karuk people with fire that ended abruptly with contact, the Gold Rush, the genocide that occurred, so pretty abrupt change in how that landscape was managed.”(Hillman)

Leaf Hillman described the conditions on Slater Butte where the Slater Fire was ignited by failing electrical infrastructure as ecologically homogenous – the product of plantation-style forestry – and systematically mismanaged to achieve unsustainable harvest expectations. What was once a diverse, mosaic landscape where old, large hardwoods were interspersed with “legacy softwoods,” and meadows had been transformed over a relatively short period of time into a tinderbox of overgrown, fuels-rich forest ready to explode into destructive, impossible to control wildfire (Hillman).

What was once an ecologically diverse, fire-resilient landscape made up of various types of old-growth forest interspersed with meadows has been violently transformed into overgrown thickets of softwoods planted on land that has, in many cases, already been clearcut several times. These ecological transformations have been driven by greed and colonial attitudes that commodify living beings and land for short-

term financial gain without considering the consequences for people that live in the area or the future generations who will inherit the ecological outcomes of management regimes being utilized throughout the KNF (Harling) (McCovey). According to Hillman, “they weren’t planning on hanging around...they were planning on raping and pillaging (both people and the land)...They weren’t thinking about the next generation or seven generations down the road,” (Hillman).

By continuing to manage land and fire in these ways on Karuk lands, KNF desecrates spaces that are culturally essential to Karuk people. Timber salvage harvesting, a process in which burnt forests are harvested without the standard Environmental Impact Statements and public review processes required for standard timber harvest plans, add insult to injury. Forests that have been altered via previous iterations of clearcutting, plantation planting, overgrowth, and wildfire are made available for rapid harvest once wildfire has further impacted the landscape. The justification for salvage harvesting is that the trees are damaged or have been killed by previous wildfires and that they represent a continued fire risk unless removed. This overlooks the ecological importance of fire-damaged and dead trees in ecosystems and represents the prioritization of producing board-feet of timber versus effective landscape management (Lindenmayer, Burton and Franklin).

KNF’s utilization of Karuk lands as timber plantations and its focus on fire suppression has created conditions in which destructive wildfires are inevitable. These commodification / suppression methods interrupt Karuk access to land while threatening what little land the Tribe still holds. Ecological disruption on this scale threatens entire

communities. Slater Butte, a culturally important place carefully tended by generations of Karuk people, was transformed within a century into a life-threatening mass of overgrown fuels. The community of Happy Camp knew that the forest surrounding them was dangerous to the town. They carefully and repeatedly produced studies that demonstrated their needs in terms of land management and fuels reduction and sought the assistance of KNF in reducing the threat of wildfires to the community. Community needs were systematically ignored, and the ecological collaborations long maintained by Karuk people continued to be disrupted.

Wildfire was not an existential threat before these colonial, profit-driven disruptions: “One thing we've never had to deal with here before... is fear of fire destroying our communities. That's never been part of our experience in this place for 1000s of years... Because our communities have never been at risk of destruction to fire as they are today because of mismanagement of these forests,” (Hillman). Karuk people, having created reciprocal ways of tending the landscape informed by many generations engaging the landscape and observing how it responded to certain interventions, knew that wildfire was inevitable but that its potential for threatening their interests could be reduced via cultural fire.

Leaf Hillman explains:

“... you have to actively manage it...this isn't a wilderness area. And they said, you could ride a horse for... days and never have to get off... because there was no brush, you know, there's just these big... majestic trees and open [land] - that wasn't an accident. [T]hey weren't discovering uninhabited wilderness. **They were discovering a carefully manicured and managed landscape that was healthy, productive, and abundant, but had been managed by Native people**

**to be exactly that.** And the problem I think... is that they weren't... much interested in maintaining that - they were interested in greed.”

The legacies of settler invasion and genocide of Indigenous people in the Klamath Basin have been foundational in shaping the ecological conditions that made the Slater Fire inevitable. Land theft, capitalism, and white supremacy have created conditions that generate ecological disasters on Karuk land 170 years after the California Gold Rush began and the decades of ethnic cleansing it instigated. Settler colonial logics of erasure, as described by Wolfe, have been weaponized by the State of California and the Federal Government in the form of the National Forest Service to justify their attempts to exterminate the Karuk people and destroy their relationship with their traditional territories.

#### Conflagration – The Slater Fire of 2020

“And then that history, from contact and into genocide and to now is one of rape and pillage, greed, extraction, industrial scale logging... that created the conditions - there's nothing that's gonna stop that fire. I don't [care] if you had 10 bulldozers and a line, ...10 bulldozers wide, **nothing could stop that fire.** Under any circumstances, nothing could stand in the way of that fire. Because of the conditions that have been created on that landscape... the economy, the mills that were around Happy Camp, all those years, all this artificial economy that was created and the absolute mismanagement of the forests, seeing them as a resource, only to be extracted. And not putting anything back - not giving a shit about managing the land, but just making money and supporting an artificial economy that is unsustainable,” (Hillman).

The Slater Fire of 2020 was sparked by a downed powerline in the Klamath National Forest. The line was downed during a violent windstorm that rapidly propelled

the growth of the fire as it tore through overgrown timberlands choked with dry fuels. It moved towards the town of Happy Camp where the community was largely unaware of the inferno that moved towards homes, businesses, and Tribal buildings (Ho).

Verna Reece, Karuk basket weaver and Happy Camp resident was notified of the fire and the need to evacuate her home by a friend in Eureka, California, a city roughly three hours' drive away, who had heard about the fire via a family member who did not have a car and needed help evacuating from Tribal housing in Happy Camp. The fire moved so quickly that many community members only found out about the fire when they noticed the rapidly growing and moving mass of smoke produced as the fire raced through KNF's overgrown timber plantations. Reece's husband had headed home from Orleans, an hour downriver from Happy Camp, and when he arrived "didn't know about the fire. He just came home, and I met him, and I said, 'there's a fire coming... we have got to get out.' So, we grabbed a few things, and we didn't think it was gonna get our place because we took care of our place - we cut and brushed. Didn't do any good. And you could see the fire coming down and the wind was so bad. Just like a train coming through," (Reece).

Reece, who has lived in Karuk traditional territory on and off since she was a child, had taken extra precautions to protect her home from wildfire. She and her husband had done extensive fuels reduction on their land and had installed a metal roof on their home to reduce its risk of being damaged or destroyed by fire. These precautions were, unfortunately, not enough to save their home from being destroyed. Pieces of their roof were the only things that remained of their cabin and those had been twisted nearly past

recognition. Verna and her husband lost everything other than a few personal possessions that they had grabbed before the fire approached their home. Their story was not unique in the aftermath of the fire. 200 homes were destroyed by the Slater Fire leaving many homeless and struggling to recreate any sort of stability in their day to day lives (Reece).

The fire raged for over two months during which Karuk cultural observers did their best to represent the interests of the tribe as firefighters used bulldozers and other heavy machinery in attempts to control the fire and protect community interests. Cultural observers accompany fire crews and advocate for culturally sensitive sites that the Tribe wants protected from disruption or destruction. Many culturally sensitive sites are treated according to Karuk cultural burning and fuels reduction practices to protect them once a wildfire starts. Karuk do as much preventative work as possible to protect sites of cultural and religious importance so that they can request that fire crews avoid disturbing them during fires (McCovey).

In the case of the Slater Fire, Karuk cultural practitioners had worked to protect several culturally valuable black oak trees that had been growing near Indian Creek, northeast of Happy Camp, for over one hundred years. Tribal members had cleared brush and grass from around the trees and had communicated their importance to fire crew leaders. Once the cultural observer had left the area – they are often overstretched in terms of the land they must monitor, especially during a megafire as large as the Slater – a chainsaw operator cut down the trees. This is an event that happens all too frequently: Tribal cultural observers strive to protect culturally important locations, whether they be groves of trees or rock outcroppings used in ceremonies or other culturally significant

sites that are comparable to churches or cathedral for the Karuk, and once the observers are forced to leave to address other responsibilities, the sites are desecrated by Forest Service or other firefighting laborers (McCovey).

While researching, I spoke to several people who had witnessed these acts. The stumps of the black oak trees mentioned above were visited – they are a lingering testament to the cultural warfare endured by the Karuk Tribe. One man, wanting to remain anonymous, described the destruction of a cultural site on another fire that burned south of Happy Camp during the summer of 2021, approximately one year after the Slater Fire started. He spoke of a large boulder used by the Karuk for ceremonial purposes. The land around the boulder had been cleared of fuels by Karuk people to prevent its disruption during a fire event. When a wildfire was burning in the area, the Karuk cultural observer communicated the importance of the boulder to heavy machinery operators working the fire.

As soon as the observer left the site, the heavy machinery operator pushed the boulder down the hill. Even when Karuk communities are threatened by wildfire, they do everything in their power to protect culturally important sites. According to interviews and personal conversations, they are consistently met with callous dismissals of their interests and values and are, time and time again, forced to watch as their lands and cultural sites are ravaged by settlers and ecological conditions shaped via settler interests. The Klamath National Forest has altered the land that they oversee as to make it nearly unrecognizable when compared to the spaces created by Karuk people via their

stewardship practices. In doing so they generated ecologically unstable spaces primed for megafires.

“They didn't think about a healthy forest - if we had healthy forests between Slater Butte and that first house burned down in Happy Camp if we had spent the time propagating healthy forests that had old trees, big trees, that were appropriately diverse, we had oaks and stands and legacy firs and pines. And when you had that kind of diversity... that fire couldn't have traveled from there to there... with a wind event driving it, it couldn't have done it because you [would] have natural barriers. And that natural barrier is a healthy forest that is diverse,” (Hillman).

By criminalizing Karuk lifeways and promoting fire suppression as the only tool for tending fire-prone landscapes, the National Forest Service has undermined the ability of communities throughout the Klamath Basin to protect themselves and their cultural interests. It has promoted the destruction of Karuk culture at the expense of all involved parties. Instead of supporting the management of healthy, diverse forests, it has created conditions throughout Karuk aboriginal territory that further threaten the wellbeing of Karuk people and their neighbors.

Visiting Slater Butte and the land that stretches out from Indian Creek is a breathtaking experience. The land is studded, as far as the eye can see, with the skeletal remains of fir and pine trees. A year after the fire began, in August 2021, there was evidence that some things had started to grow through the glass-like ground. Some brush species and trees whose seeds were not destroyed by the passage of the fire had sprouted into the desolate rolling hills marred by the ashen remains of the abused forestlands of the Klamath National Forest. It looked like an apocalyptic wasteland. Kathy McCovey, clearly tempering her own expectations, said that the fire had created a unique

opportunity – by destroying the forest, the Slater Fire had reset forest succession in a way that could, with Karuk cultural fire as a fundamental tool for managing the landscape, allow Karuk people to reform the reciprocal relationships that had generated and maintained fire-resilient landscapes that supported the cultural needs of Karuk people before settler invasion, genocide, and land theft. In some twisted way, the Slater Fire could represent a new opportunity, a resetting of priorities and access that could help heal long-festering wounds. If the Karuk people are allowed to do what they know how to do, to do what they know is right.

## CONCLUSION

The Slater Fire was a disastrous event for Karuk people. It represents the genocidal outcomes of settler colonial management methods and attitudes and exemplifies the ways that such methods attack Karuk people and lands. The Slater Fire would not have occurred had the settler state not imposed extraction-obsessed, ecologically destructive systems onto stolen Karuk lands. If Karuk people had been able to continue to use cultural fire in the ways that best serve their communities and the lands that those communities rely upon, conflagrations like the Slater Fire would not be an increasingly common occurrence on Karuk territories.

This is a story of genocidal violence, both historical and current, being wielded against the Karuk people for over 170 years. It is also a testament to the resiliency and fortitude of Karuk people and their culture. They have endured terrible hardship since the creation of the State of California and the nightmarish outcomes that statehood unleashed up their people and have managed to maintain their cultural knowledge and understanding of their essential role in the spaces they helped to create. Karuk people, even without the relative security provided by reservation lands, have continued to promote and implement cultural fire on their aboriginal lands. They have fought to reclaim access and cultural freedom in the spaces that they have so intimately shaped since time immemorial. They continue to fix the world with fire and ceremony.

This thesis has analyzed the various ways that settler colonial land and resource management regimes have perpetuated genocidal violence towards Karuk people in their

aboriginal territories. It describes Karuk cultural fire and connects historical genocidal violence carried out by the settler state with more modern outcomes of fire suppression on Karuk lands. The historical arch that stretches from early acts of greed-driven, racist genocidal violence perpetuated against Indigenous people in Northern California to the current unfolding reality of ecologically volatile, stolen Indigenous lands should be clear to readers. The Slater Fire is the outcome of systemic, evolving acts of genocidal violence towards Karuk people.

Karuk people continue to be violently cut off from their lands. The outcomes of this separation are detrimental to the wellbeing of Karuk people and their traditional lifeways. Those same outcomes threaten the settler communities that live in and adjacent to Karuk lands: megafires do not discriminate in their destruction and will consume the lives and resources of settler and Indigenous peoples alike. Returning Karuk land to Karuk people and supporting their use of cultural fire is in the interest of all impacted communities. The Klamath National Forest is not caring for the stolen land they control in ways that consider the needs of the people who live on and near them.

This work is limited in scale and scope. It is focused on the experiences of Karuk people and is centered in their experiences and narratives. Future work on the topic could further investigate the ways that the National Forest Service as a federal entity interacts with Indigenous populations in various ways. The hiring practices and work culture of various Forests needs to be further examined to understand the ways that the Service perpetuates genocidal violence via the personnel assigned to oversee Indigenous lands. The ways that planting and harvesting timber interacts with fire suppression and fire

fighting in National Forests needs to be further examined as a component of the ecological violence experienced by Indigenous peoples. Is firefighting becoming a larger industry than timber for National Forests? Fire fighting in California is a multi-billion-dollar business. What does that mean for Indigenous peoples whose land has been commodified by the settler state?

The Slater Fire is one event of many that demonstrate genocidal violence inherent in modern management regimes. There is still work to be done in shaping a deeper understanding of the causes and outcomes of events like the Slater Fire and in generating solutions to ongoing systemic issues faced by Indigenous peoples in the United States. Some of the most immediate questions that come to mind are: How can Community Fire-Safe Councils better support the needs of those they represent when interacting with the Forest Service? If Forests refuse to work with communities in meaningful ways to counter the threats created by Forest management methods, what should those communities do? Are there ways that communities can better negotiate with the Forest Service or is the institution in need of a systemic overhaul? Can the National Forest Service represent the interests of the communities it purports to protect while overseeing stolen lands? How can the Karuk Tribe get more or all of its Land Back?

This work examines one component of the ways that genocidal violence is wielded against Karuk people and Indigenous people. Fire suppression is a mode of settler violence that seeks to destroy Indigenous culture and, in turn, Indigenous people. It positions settler profit and control of land over the survival of Indigenous people. It represents destructive degrees of hubris both in the idea that human beings can control

natural forces such as fire, and in the foolhardy attitudes of settlers who believed they were better equipped to manage the lands they had stolen from Indigenous people. I hope that this can contribute to an ongoing discussion about the importance of critically examining the histories of California, the United States, and coloniality as a whole and that those discussions can lead to fundamental transformations in the ways that people and land are treated in our society. In the case of the mid-Klamath Basin, there are people who know what to do, to fix things, and those people are Karuk.

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## APPENDICES

## Appendix A: Klamath River Jack Letters

California Fish and Game (book?)

“An Indian’s View of Burning and a Reply” \*

[The Fish and Game Commission recently received an interesting letter, purporting to be written by an Indian in Del Norte County, which contained a plea for the burning of forest areas to destroy persts and renew growth. Th United States Forest Service has furnished an answer. Both letters are here published because they entertainingly express in informal English tow opposing views of a mooted question – EDITOR.]

Requa, Cal..

May 27, 1916

Fish and Game Commission,

San Francisco, Cal.

Dear Sir: Long time before White Man come, Indians eat fish, acorns and deer meat, that’s all. He gets just what he wants to eat. Eat ‘um fresh in summer time smoke ‘um for after awhile when winter come. Deer, elk and bear him eat grass, young brush and acorn and wild berry. Every winter too much wet so everything grow very fast: you see White Man he cut out all old wood on berry bushes and fruit trees, because he know berry and fruit tree grow much large on new wood, more than old wood, he know bug eat leaf and worm get in fruit and make ‘um no good for eat; well you see Indian know all this too because long time before White Man come, Indian here. White Man he take care of what he plant and what he use. White Man he have time every year to cut out old wood and make lots of big berry and fruit grow, for what he wants to eat. WHY DON’T HE KNOW SAME ‘BOUT FOREST? White man can brush in pasture so grass grow for stock to eat; but Indian no have berry bush and fruit tree to plant so he have fix all wild berry bush and fruit tree and make brush stop so not choke grass. Indian have no medicine to put on all places where bug and worm are, so he burn; every year Indian burn. Fire burn off old wood on berry bush make new wood grow and lots of big berry come.

Fire burn an old acorn that fall on ground. Old acorn on ground have lots worm; no burn old acorn, no burn old bark, old leaves, bugs and worms come more every year. Fire

make new sprout for deer and elk to eat and kill lots brush so always have plenty open grass land for grass. No fire brush grow quick and after while choke out all grass and make too much shade, then grass get sour, no good for eat. No fire then too much leaf stay on ground, no grass can grow up, too much dead leaf ground get sour. Indian burn every year just same so keep all ground clean, no bark, no dead leaf, no old wood on ground, no old wood on brush, so no bug can stay to eat leaf and no worm can stay to eat berry and acorn. Not much on ground to make hot fire so never hurt big trees, where fire burn. Now White Man never burn; he pass law to stop all fire in forest and wild pasture and all time he keep right on cutting out old wood on berry bush and fruit tree and cut brush off grass land and put medicine to kill worms and bugs. WHY HE NO LET FIRE DO SAME IN FOREST AS HE DO TO BERRY BUSH AND FRUIT TREE? White Man say he don't understand why wild berry get small and more few every year and acorn get all wormy, and no more grass land and why deer die when they eat sour grass under brush and tree, made sour by too much shade.

Indian know and bye-un-bye White Man say he know too, but Indian say, WHITE MAN YOU KNOW TOO LATE.

Yours Truly,

(Signed) Klamath River Jack

Dear Jack:

A while back you wrote a letter to the man in San Francisco who is the Boss of the Outfit that takes care of the deer and the fish and the birds. You told him how things were in the woods and the mountains before the white man came along. You asked lots of questions too, Jack, and I want to tell you why the white man does things like you say.

We wont get into any college debate and use dictionary words: lets start with the main thing, grub. You eat deer meat, fish and acorns. You want lots of these things, so to keep the supply going you set fire in the woods. They burn over a big country and then next spring you see lots of new shoots on the brush; manzanita, scrub oak, snowbrush and all the rest of them. But you don't see any shoots on the little pines and firs, do you? No! They are dry and dead; all of them up to twenty feet high. Maybe that don't mean anything to you because the pine tree ain't good feed for deer. But I want to tell why it does mean something to you and the deer, too.

You say that the white man prunes his bushes to make them grow better – that's true. You say that the Indian prunes his wild bushed with fire and he gets the same results –

that's true. But, Jack, do you want the brush to grow so thick? Most Indians say no. They want to ride through the woods without having to fight their way through brush. Now, the two best friends the thick, heavy brush has got are sun and fire. When the fire runs through, it burns the old wood on the brush and in the spring there are ten little stalks started where there were only two before. But at the same time all the young pine trees are killed. Then there is not much left to throw shade on the brush and after a few years living in the open sun the brush field is lots thicker than it ever was before and there is no grass and the deer are forced to go back under the heavy timber where the ground is open.

Of course that fire didn't burn the big pine trees, but how long do you think those big trees are going to live? – not a great many years. And when they die there are no trees to take their places because you burnt all the little trees while they were growing up. And then there will be nothing but brush fields and no shade for man and deer to travel in and no grass because the brush is so thick. Now, what would have happened if there had been no fire? The little pine trees would have pushed their heads up over the brush and spread out their branches and thrown shade over the brush. As they got bigger and made lots of shade the brush would have got sick and finally died out just like a flower that you try to grow in a tin can in your dark cabin. And why is that? Just because brush can not stand shade.

Not long ago I went over to Frank Long's to offer him a job on the White Horse Road. Thought I'd make a cut-off to save some time so I rode up the ridge back of Adam's cabin and figured to cut across Elk Creek Canyon. I was in the open timber all the way until I started down the side of the canyon and run plumb into that long brush field you can see from the river. You know, the one that runs from the Queen Mine flume clear to the top of the mountain. I tried to jam through it but couldn't make it, so had to ride clear up and around the brush.

Did you ever stop to think what made that brush field? Do you know that all through it there are old black stumps burned clear into the ground? Fire did it. When I asked Frank about it he said that three big fires had run over that place in the last 20 years. Are there any berries in that strip; is there any grass in there; can you hunt in there? No, Jack, because your fire is bad medicine. If that place had been left alone there would be big timber all over it and you could ride anywhere and there would be lots of grass on the ground for deer and cattle.

And, Jack, if your acorns are wormy, don't blame it on the white man keeping fire out of the country – there are a good many other things that keep bugs alive. And I have seen the best kind of acorn crops in places that never felt a fire. Anyway, there are other things that make better flour than acorns; why not plant some grain and vegetables and fruit trees on that flat back of your cabin? That's white man's grub, but it's pretty good.

Yours truly,

(Signed) Jim Casey

Forest Ranger

\*This text was copied from a low-quality photocopy of the original for ease of reading and use. The grammatical errors are those of the original.

## Appendix B: Interviews Performed

Name	Position / Background	Location(s) of Interview	Date(s)
<b>Kathy McCovey</b>	Forest Service Archaeologist (Retired), Karuk Cultural Practitioner	Offield Mountain, Siskiyou County; Klamath National Forest, Indian Creek (Slater Fire site)	July 7, 2021 July 8, 2021
<b>Wilverna Reece</b>	Karuk Cultural Practitioner, Master Basket Weaver	Orleans, CA at interviewee's home	February 10, 2022
<b>Bill Tripp</b>	Deputy Director of the Karuk Tribe's Department of Natural Resources, Karuk Cultural Practitioner	Zoom	September 28, 2021
<b>Will Harling</b>	Director of Mid-Klamath Watershed Council, Community Member	Phone	December 8, 2021
<b>Leaf Hillman interviewed by Bruno Seraphin</b>	Karuk Cultural Practitioner and Oral Historian	Recorded by Bruno at Leaf's home in Orleans, CA	October 9, 2020
<b>There were numerous attempts to arrange interviews with current and retired Forest Service employees who were at one time employed by Klamath National Forest.</b>	Initial and secondary emails requesting interviews were not responded to.	This could be the result of workplace conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic or could be indicative of underlying workplace attitudes towards the Tribe or academics.	The perspectives and experiences of KNF employees could improve the scope of this work.