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**And the Elders and Scholars Wept: A Retrospective on the
Symposium: Killing California Indians: Genocide in the Gold Rush
Era, Held at the University of California - Riverside, 7 November
2014, Organized by the California Center for Native Nations**

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Acknowledgements

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And the Elders and Scholars Wept: A Retrospective on the Symposium: *Killing California Indians: Genocide in the Gold Rush Era*, Held at the University of California - Riverside, 7 November 2014, Organized by the California Center for Native Nations

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Abstract: *This retrospective looks-back on and provides a summation of Killing California Indians: Genocide in the Gold Rush Era, a symposium organized and executed by the California Center for Native Nations and the University of California, Riverside. It provides a synopsis of each of the papers presented as well as the presentations of the Native Community Panel, all of which all dealt with the nineteenth century genocide. Highlights of audience discussion as well as a description of cleansings and blessings offered by local spiritual leaders and the Native flute tributes that opened and closed the event are included, as well.*

Keywords: *California, Native American, United States, settler colonialism, conference, symposium*

Following a few words of welcome, Clifford E. Trafzer (Wyandot ancestry), Distinguished Professor of History and Costo Chair in Native American Affairs, called for a moment of silence for all of the lives lost to horror during the nineteenth century in California. The silence was broken by a gentle Native flute tribute from Henry Vásquez (Huachichil), member of the Native American Community Council of San Bernardino and Riverside Counties. Vásquez's beautiful song of remembrance provided a stirring opening to the events of the day. The symposium, *Killing California Indians: Genocide in the Gold Rush Era*, had begun.¹

Native California community members and leaders, scholars, students, and the general public gathered on a warm November day in Riverside, California, for a symposium on a topic that is, at least at the time of this writing, still very controversial: the genocide of California Indians during the Gold Rush. Organized and executed by research fellows at the California Center for Native Nations (CCNN) and the Costo Chair, the event was an important opportunity for engagement between both Native and non-Native scholars and the broader public. Audience members quickly underscored the importance of the event and topic as the room quickly filled, forcing people to peer through the doorway and strain their ears as they spilled out into the hall.

After the formal introduction of the morning panel, the first to speak was Emeritus Professor Jack Norton (Hupa/Cherokee) of Humboldt State University. Norton is the dean of the field, having published *Genocide in Northwestern California: When Our Worlds Cried*, the first academic tract on the subject, through the Indian Historian Press in 1979. His presentation, *To Destroy in Whole or in Part: Remembering the Past to Affirm Our Future*, began the symposium with a uniquely experiential view of the genocidal actions committed during and after the Gold Rush era from a Native northwestern California perspective. He wove together personal, historical and cultural narratives that bore witness to the heinous crimes that were committed against California Indian Nations as a way to destroy, in whole or in part, them and their time honored religious beliefs, traditional customs, and ways of being.

Professor Norton's personal history brought great insight and emotion to the morning panel. An enrolled member of the Yurok Tribe, he traced his family name to his great-grandfather, Amonzo Norton. Amonzo came to California in the early 1850s and married a full blood Hupa woman from the Quimby family of the village of Tswenaldin. Though Amonzo "had no business in California, in Hupa, in Tswenaldin..." he was there, and, as a result, his great grandson, Jack Norton, Jr., was there to tell the story.

Norton adeptly painted a larger picture of the horrific episodes of the genocide, one that went even beyond the brutal murders. Explaining that many genocidal episodes in the northwest California took place during religious ceremonies, he mourned the burning of sacred ceremonial objects and regalia, some of which was looted and can be seen today in museum collections on the East Coast. At times, the Hupa elder's voice cracked noticeably, causing him to pause in silence to wipe a tear from his eye, as he spoke of babies burned alive along with the regalia during

a massacre at the village of Yontoket in 1853. In this way, he proved the impossible, showing that such horrific episodes were even worse than people, Native and non-Natives, scholars and students, had imagined.

Academic works often fail to show the raw emotion that wells forth during discussions of the history of California Indians. At times, several of the scholars broke down and cried due to the nature of their topics. The next presenter, Professor Brendan Lindsay of Sacramento State University, could not stop the tears when he spoke about the horror experienced by Native children stolen from their parents and taken into settlers' homes for forced labor and sexual gratification. Lindsay, who published the award winning book, *Murder State: California's Native American Genocide, 1846-1873*, in 2012 with the University of Nebraska Press, centered his talk on Section (e) of the United Nations' definition of genocide: "Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group." He explained how the first law the state of California ever passed, the 1850 *Act for the Government and Protection of Indians*, effectively legalized child slavery through the indenture of Native orphans into non-Native homes.

Lindsay detailed the broader implications of the legislation, since the demand it created for orphans thus created an incentive to murder Indian parents. His research brought to light an amendment to the law ten years later that expanded the indenture to adult Indians and, though the practice legally ended just three years later in 1863, Indian children continued to be taken into non-Indian homes for decades. Thus, Lindsay showed that scholarly periodization of the Gold Rush Genocide may indeed need to be reevaluated. Though the work presented was the preliminary stages of his next project, it proved that there is still much to be done on the scholarship of genocide in California.

Sociologist James Fenelon (Dakota/Lakota) of California State University, San Bernardino, rounded out the morning panel. He reminded the audience of the many talks on Native survivance at the California Indian Conference he cohosted the month prior. The conference was another event in which the pain of the California Indian experience was evident. However, while elders, community members, and scholars all shared stories of community destruction, they also shared their survival and renaissance, as well. Fenelon's presentation added further breadth to the symposium discussions by examining the genocide through a world systems lens. Through this, he showed the connections between the Gold Rush Genocide and the rest of Native America from first contact and around the United States. He also examined the processes of recognition of and healing from genocides throughout the world to provide possible avenues for the future.

As the speakers shared their research and personal experience with the attentive crowd, more and more people came to the door, eager to hear their presentations. People crowded shoulder-to-shoulder in the chairs, and students gave up their seats for elders when each scholar finished. More and more people sat on the floor, leaned against walls, and peered through the door from the hallway when there simply was no more room. Coordinators from the CCNN busily worked with university staff and found a larger room for the afternoon session. In the midst of this, a well-respected Cahuilla/Serrano religious leader noted the spiritual heaviness that came with the subject matter, pointing out boxes of tissues being passed around among the audience and speakers. He humbly requested to perform a cleansing of the room before the audience discussion to which the coordinators eagerly assented.

With a few brief words from the community leadership, the audience turned to the four cardinal directions in unison with the blessing as *pivat* (tobacco) smoke, fanned by eagle feathers, cleansed the room of the negativity. Though the religious leader thanked the coordinators for allowing him to perform the ritual, it was they who were truly grateful for his help. The episode showed the flexible, organic, and, indeed, Native nature of the event. More importantly, however, it spoke to the close bonds that have formed between the university and the local Native community through the California Center for Native Nations.

Audience members began the discussion period by asking for clarification on several points from each of the scholars. However, the most interesting moments of the discussion came from two Native community members. After thanking the panelists, a Haudenosaunee gentleman who recently moved to California from New York spoke fervently about the need to organize amongst the various tribes and with the non-Native community as well. The symposium was

indeed a great example of such organization, itself. Another audience member, a Cupeño man, spoke passionately about learning and sharing Native ways and spirituality when he lived in the northwest of California. Emotion grew as he shared deeply of the pain his people felt because of their continued separation from their homeland, the village of Kupa in San Diego County, from which the United States government forcefully removed them in 1903.

During the lunch break, elders, scholars, and community leaders were invited to share in a meal provided by Zacatecas Café, a local restaurant owned by a family of mixed Maidu and Mexican heritage with strong ties to the University of California, Riverside. Though seemingly trivial, the meal provided an excellent opportunity for networking among academics and community members. The night before, the participants and members of the local Native community had also gathered at Zacatecas for a welcome meal. The amount of discussion, sharing, learning, and reminiscing highlighted the importance of such gatherings for community members and scholars. The university prides itself on these strong working relationships that it has fostered with the surrounding communities. Old friendships were rekindled and new ones forged while intellectual discourse furthered everyone's knowledge and understanding of the Native experience during the Gold Rush.

In a larger room down the hall, noted historian George Phillips, emeritus professor at the University of Colorado, began the afternoon panel and filled the role of *contraire* among the scholars. He began by strongly agreeing with the argument first set out by Jack Norton that, according to the 1948 United Nations definition, what happened in California during the Gold Rush period indeed constituted genocide. Phillips then began listing various events from throughout world history from the English invasion of Ireland to the Zulus under Shaka, the Khans of Mongolia to Pol Pot in Cambodia. Could labelling what happened in nineteenth century California as genocide actually do a disservice to the people and what they went through by enabling scholars to merely categorize it alongside innumerable other acts of global genocide and forget about it, he wondered. Perhaps there was a better approach for academics to take.

Phillips then painted a scene of a Nazi concentration camp commandant and his family sitting down to a nice Christmas dinner with a backdrop of snow falling outside the window and a large chimney ominously belching black smoke into the background. He used the image as an example of an understatement, a technique he has employed throughout his career as a historian, and one he believes should be employed in the case of the Gold Rush Genocide. This juxtaposition of the dinner and death, he argued, clearly showed the true evil of the situation. Making monsters out of criminals who commit genocide, he pointed out, masks the true horror that is humans brutally killing other humans.

Like Brendan Lindsay, Benjamin Madley of the University of California, Los Angeles, is a rising star in the field. His first book, *An American Genocide: The California Indian Catastrophe* will soon be published by the Yale University Press. He presented on his work exploring the *Modoc War* of 1872-73, which, he argued is a grave misnomer. One of Madley's greatest contributions was his analysis of the continued application of the labels battle or war to events that, when examined historically, amounted to little more than genocidal campaigns by death squads. He pointed out that resistance to genocide, such as that put up by the famed Modoc leader Kintpuash, or Captain Jack, is not uncommon, as one finds examples of such resistance in more famous instances such as the Auschwitz-Birkenau, Sobibór, Treblinka, and Warsaw Ghetto Uprisings. Nevertheless, the war and battle labels in schools and scholarship today, continue to obscure the truth of incidents such as the seven murderous campaigns specifically launched by the United States Army and local militias to eradicate the Modocs as a people.

Michelle Lorimer of California State University, San Bernardino, brought more focus to the issues of representation in modern representation with a focus on textbooks. She has contracted with Great Oak Press, a new venture of the Pechanga Band of Luiseño Indians, to publish her forthcoming book, *Reconstructing the Past: Historical Interpretations and Native Experiences at Contemporary California Missions*, which critiques the romanticized history around the Spanish California missions that continues to minimize Native voices. Examining many of the textbooks used in California public schools, Lorimer showed how Californians are still reared with the false image of sourdough miners and the victorious Gold Rush. Combined with a whitewashing of

the Spanish mission system, these texts, she argued, go against statements published by the State Board of Education that stress the deep importance of students recognizing the sanctity of life. Lorimer showed that, at best, some of these texts offer a tarnished version of history which may recognize negative issues such as unfair treaties, dispossession of land, and the reservation system, but still ignore the sheer violence and genocide committed against California Indians. These evince a large gap between current scholarship that recognizes the genocide and the history taught to California's students which has led to a gross public ignorance of state history.

James Ramos (Serrano), a San Bernardino County supervisor and former tribal chair of the San Manuel Band of Mission Indians, aptly followed Lorimer's presentation and chaired the Native Community Panel. He began the session with a brief description of the thirty-two day campaign against the Serrano by local militia forces in 1866. His own great-grandfather, Santos Manuel, bravely used his spiritual and leadership abilities to lead his band of Yuhaviatam down from the mountains to the valley below. Ramos explained the importance of the symposium for making the truth known to the public – not for blame, but in order to understand where we, as a society, must go in the future.

Supervisor Ramos knows full well the importance of education. In 2011, California Governor Jerry Brown appointed him to the State Board of Education. In addition to representing all Californians, Ramos worked toward acknowledgement of the genocide in state education standards and addressed educational issues facing Native Californians throughout the state. Unfortunately, his election to the Board of Supervisors of San Bernardino County meant his departure from the Board of Education. The situation is promising, however, as Governor Brown appointed Niki Sandoval of the Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Mission Indians to replace him. Ramos assured the audience and panelists that he will continue to work with her to amend the state's primary and secondary education curriculum.

The first panelist was former long-time Executive Secretary of the California Native Heritage Commission, Larry Myers (Pomo). He brought his many decades of experience to the fore. For years, Myers fought for the protection of sacred and cultural sites and the repatriation of human remains and tribal patrimony throughout the state. He has seen slow but steady progress on these issues and noted that the symposium and the large audience in attendance was a testament to the fact that the genocide of Native Californians has come out of the shadows and is becoming something society can talk about.

Two graduate students offered their perspectives as a non-California Native women living in California. Daisy Ocampo (Caxcan/Zoque) spoke of her work chronicling her peoples' fight for their sacred lands in Mexico. She drew parallels to the experience of California Indians in the nineteenth century as they, too, lost access to their sacred sites and lands and saw them destroyed by industrial economic greed. Meranda Roberts (Northern Paiute) added a unique dimension to the symposium by explaining that miners did not confine their lust for mineral wealth within artificial boundaries. Rather, when the Forty-niners advanced eastward over the Sierra Nevada, they soon ignited the Nevada Silver Rush, bringing terror to and destroying the lives of the Paiute people who lived on both sides of the state line.² Roberts drew a line of causation from these events to famed religious leader Jack Wilson, better known as Wovoka, founder of the Ghost Dance, and thence to the tragedy of the Wounded Knee Massacre among the Lakota.

Gregg Castro (t'row t'raahl Salinan/rumsien Ohlone) eloquently spoke about the pain of the past but underscored the need to move forward and do things in a proper way. He warned the community to resist the urge to blame and hate. Castro linked many modern problems that continue to tear Native communities apart to an on-going genocide, one in which Native people, at times, unknowingly perpetuate. The desire to operate in a non-Indian world using non-Native ways only leads to further destruction and loss, he said.

Steven Newcomb (Lenape/Shawnee) of Kumeyaay Community College, too, reminded the audience of the non-Native influences and structures that supported the colonization of the Americas and led to events like the Gold Rush Genocide. Newcomb shared quotations from United States court cases to show the active role the original Doctrine of Discovery played in the invasion of California and thus the genocide that followed. He also brought copies of various court decisions, laws, and other government documents to prove the complicity of the state government in many of the genocidal acts of the nineteenth century.

Sean Milanovich (Cahuilla) was the final participant to speak on the panel. He spoke of his own people's experience with non-Native newcomers following the invasion of their lands by the United States. A respected elder Alvino Siva passed down to him a story about a day when all of the men were away from the village. Pedro Chino, a *pavuul*, the highest kind of shaman, sensed trouble and told the people to hide behind the large boulders near the entrance of Chino Canyon. Non-Indians had come to kill the people, but Chino refused to allow them to get near. They began to shoot at him, but the *pavuul* was very powerful and was able to deflect every shot fired at him, thus giving his people time to run escape up the canyon.

Though Milanovich has learned much from Cahuilla community elders, his own relations were more reluctant. Whenever he asked his grandmother, LaVerne Miguel, about Cahuilla culture and history, she always said she did not know anything. At one point, he told her that it just could not be, she had to know something, to which she responded that it was just too painful to share with him. Tears flowed as he described the hurt caused by her response and all of the lost culture and language that resulted from the pain his grandmother shared with many other Cahuillas. "I don't want to hurt anymore," he lamented, "and I don't want my children to grow up with it either." His was a powerful example of intergenerational trauma that continues to afflict many Native families throughout the state.

The true emotion of the event, though difficult to capture in words, is important for anyone seeking to understand the genocide and its impacts. Thankfully, representatives from the Sycuan Band of the Kumeyaay Nation and the Native-owned Digidat Solutions filmed the proceedings in order to preserve as much of the symposium as possible. Both entities are, as of this writing, busy working with the California Center for Native Nations editing their footage to produce a DVD that will be stored in community, tribal, and university libraries for the future.

A detailed discussion of what Californians, Native and non-Native, need to do next followed the individual presentations of the Native Community Panel. Audience members interacted with the panelists on points ranging from corporatism and resource development to intertribal organization and sovereignty. Speaking on what needs to happen with the topic of the genocide, Gregg Castro compared it to a splinter in one's finger. "You first need to do the painful work of digging it out so that you can heal. And it's important to ensure that you get all of the pieces out so that it can heal properly, no matter how badly it hurts to keep digging around in there." The tears shed throughout the day were evidence that the process was still underway.

The symposium was a great success on many levels, and many people inquired as to when the next would be held. Though the symposium was not intended to be the beginning of a series of annual events and there are currently no formal plans to do so, it has already helped to advance the field as two research associates with the CCNN have begun work on an edited volume based on the proceedings. There is much work to be done, and the relationships between scholars and the Native community forged both at the symposium and in the years preceding promise to yield rich fruit. Fittingly, the day ended as it had begun, with a flute tribute from Henry Vásquez. Only this time, it was a song of hope for the future.

Endnotes

- 1 Though this symposium was not affiliated with the International Association for Genocide Studies, its subject matter pertains to the aims and goals of the Association, and its proceedings will be of interest to the readers of *Genocide Studies and Prevention*.
- 2 Forty-niner is the historic term for the miners of the California Gold Rush, most of whom came to the region in 1849.