

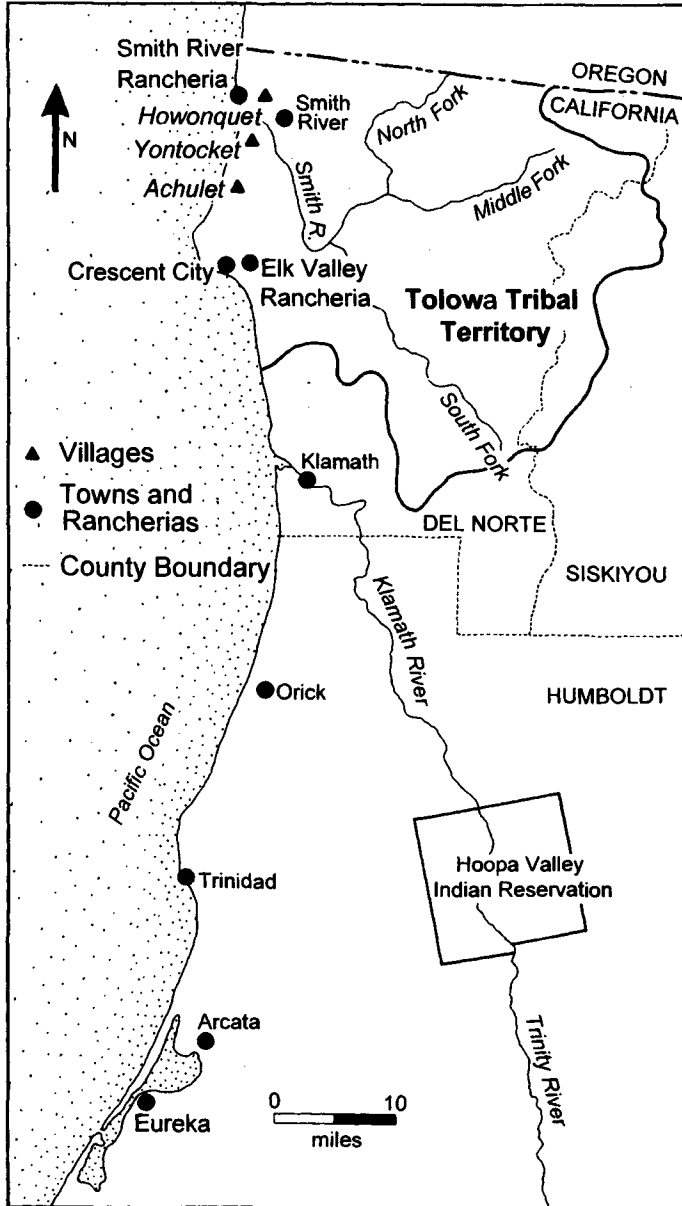
UNDERSTANDING  
TOLOWA  
HISTORIES

Western Hegemonies & Native American Responses

**James Collins**



# Understanding Tolowa Histories



Map Showing Del Norte County, Pre-Contact Tribal Territory, and Historical Villages and Towns

*U*nderstanding  
*T*olowa  
*H*istories

Western Hegemonies and  
Native American Responses



James Collins

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## N o t e o n T r a n s c r i p t i o n

In the interests of simplicity and accessibility, I have followed a two-fold strategy in my presentation of Tolowa linguistic materials. The spelling of the names of commonly used village and rancheria sites and prominent historical figures, occurring primarily in chapters one, two, three, and seven, are based on the anglicized spellings of Bommelyn (1994) and Slagle (1985a, b, 1987). These have the advantage of being easily readable and are often already familiar local usage. In chapter six all examples, whether place names, songs, or text excerpts, are given in a phonological transcription that approximates the new Tolowa Orthography presented in Bommelyn (1995). This is because in addition to arguments about cultural content, I am also presenting analyses of linguistic form, which the new transcription better represents.

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The Tolowa Language Committee, for permission to reprint material contained in Figure 1 and Map 1.

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# I n t r o d u c t i o n

## Privileged Knowledge, Subordinate Place

Through ethnographic, linguistic, and historical analyses of a particular people, the Tolowa of the Smith River area of northwestern California, this book explores a number of general questions. These include the relation between cultural otherness and political-economic subjugation; the complexities of history, as an external account and a mode of self-understanding; and the linguistic and political dynamics of claiming a place or being expropriated. I try to show how the general issues are necessary to analyze particularities of Tolowa circumstances, past and present, but further, how those Tolowa particularities force us to push our thinking about the general matters. In that sense, this book is a typical anthropological undertaking, exploring general theories via specific, contextualized facts, and using those theories to understand, and runderstand, those situation-bound facts. But this book also argues for a critique of anthropology as it has often been done, for an historical situating and contextual analysis of the discipline that makes it its business to situate and contextualize others.

The Tolowa are a small group of indigenous people living in northwest California. Like many Native Californians, they were nearly exterminated in the first few decades of American settlement of the state, and they have lived a century and a half with the possibility of social extinction. Their efforts to hold onto local places—places claimed through naming systems, stories, and songs, as well as through surveys, petitions, and congressional testimony—reflect both an effort to preserve alternative lifeways and an unavoidable transformation by the legal, political, and economic forces of the United States. The Tolowa have been reasonably well studied as to their traditional culture, but their historical circumstances, whether in the nineteenth or twentieth century, have received little scholarly attention.

A valuable source of information about aspects of traditional Tolowa life is an article entitled "Tolowa Notes," published in 1932 by Cora DuBois, an anthropologist then affiliated with the University of California at Berkeley. The article contains short entries organized under the familiar categories of description and analysis of that era: entries for the stages of life ("Girl's Puberty Ceremony," "Boys' Education," "Naming," "Marriage," "Eschatology"); social and economic organization ("Position of Women in the Division of Labor," "Social Ranks," "Wealth and Property"); for psychomedical and spiritual practices and beliefs ("Shamanism," "Poisoning," "Prayer," "Ceremonies and Dances," "Tales"). In common with studies of that time is an informant acknowledgment, a "note on sources". It opens the text of the article, and consists of two sentences:

The following information was secured during the winter of 1929 from Agnes Mattz, a full-blood Tolowa woman of forty-five, who came from Smith River, north of Requa in California. She was in domestic service in Oakland, California, at the time. (DuBois, 1932: 248)

This kind of terse reference to consultants is not uncommon in the ethnographic and linguistic literature concerning American Indian peoples from the first half of this century (e.g., Sapir, 1911; Frachtenburg, 1911; Drucker, 1937), and I do not think I had much noticed it when first reading the article. But in a later rereading, two things puzzled me. One was the name Mattz, for I knew that a Mattz was plaintiff in a 1973 fishing rights lawsuit, part of a decades-long struggle between Yurok, Tolowa, and other local peoples and the California Fish and Game authority. Mattz was Yurok, but rumored to "have Tolowa blood" and I wondered what might be the relation between him and Agnes. A second thing that puzzled me was the sentence "She was in domestic service in Oakland, California, at the time." How had a Tolowa woman in 1929 come to be working in domestic service, as a maid, cook, or cleaner, in a city four hundred miles from her home?

There are answers to both questions, though each raises additional issues. Agnes Mattz was grandmother of Raymond Mattz, the fishing rights advocate and litigant. The "full-blood Tolowa" had married a Yurok man, a common practice of intermarriage among local Indian peoples in northwest California, though it raises issues of affiliation and identity that have recently grown more pointed. Agnes Mattz was also a granddaughter of Captain Tom, a famous village headman from the early settler period. Her life thus spans several important phases of Tolowa history; it also links Tolowa families to broader Indian issues in the local area. Concerning the second question, Agnes Mattz was in domestic service in Oakland in 1929 because there had been an organized effort to find employment for Del Norte Indian peoples,

Yurok and Tolowa, in the cities of the Bay Area. The effort was organized by the Indian Welfare Committee of the San Francisco Chapter of the California Women's Leagues. It was of a piece with more general efforts in the 1920s and 1930s to gain citizenship rights for Native California peoples, to gain them some compensation for their lost territories, and to incorporate them, via gainful employment, in the larger American society (Rawls, 1984, Epilogue). This means that the authentic source on an Indian culture, a Tolowa woman of Smith River, was not just a window on the past, she was also caught up in the larger processes of rights struggles, wage labor, and reservation/city circuits that have occupied the attention and shaped the lives of many Indian people in the twentieth century.

Such matters—of intermingling peoples and modern political and economic situations—were not DuBois' focus of concern. She sought to record and analyze a traditional culture that existed prior to the onset of white civilization in northwest California. This search for the traditions and lifeways of non-European peoples has been anthropology's central mission, and much anthropological research has sought the truth of non-Western societies in their circumstances prior to, or analytically bracketed from, their contact with Europe, its colonies, settler states, and market economies. This anthropological search for peoples "without Europe" has been extensively criticized, for blindness both to the histories of the peoples it would study and to the history of anthropology as a Western discipline (Asad, 1973; Hymes, 1974; Fabian, 1983; Wolf, 1982).

The case at hand, that of the tersely acknowledged Agnes Mattz, suggests several problematic aspects of anthropological practice and knowledge. First, the convention of briefly mentioning then excluding all reference to particular informants is part of a denial of the dialogic underpinnings of ethnographic (and linguistic) fieldwork. Anthropologists learn about others by talking to them, as well as by observing, and only recently have the inherently intersubjective sources of ethnographic knowledge received theoretical and critical, rather than anecdotal, attention. In an essay entitled "On ethnographic authority," Clifford (1988) has provided an informative analysis of the textual strategies that evoke then suppress the dialogue between anthropologist and informant in the constructing of ethnographic accounts. An influential group of scholars concerned with production of anthropological texts and the critique of the discipline (Marcus and Fisher, 1986; Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Scholte, 1974) have examined and decried the ways in which anthropological analysis lacks reflexivity, that is, awareness of the subjectivity of the informant(s) as well as the analyst, of the situatedness of both.

Although such arguments are important, if critique remains limited to scholarly self-examination, writing strategies, and establishing the common

humanity of analyst and analyzed, it does not go far enough. In the case of Agnes Mattz we have a second issue, a more profound lacunae or disciplinary blindness than suppression of dialogue. We have what Fabian (1983) calls a “denial of coevalness,” a repression, suppression, or unconsciousness of shared histories between anthropologists and the peoples they would understand. These histories are multiple. There are grand narratives, such as those of colonialism and capitalism, not homogeneously spread across the globe to be sure, but formative of the epoch *shared* by anthropology and its non-European others (Asad, 1992). There are also local narratives, of the shared time of fieldwork and elicitation session and of the learning and unlearning that occurs in intersubjective exchange. Adopting Fabian’s concerns and idiom, we should ask, What is the epistemological need, both enabling and distorting, that makes anthropology search for the truth of a people always in that time which is not the present, not the time of the actual encounter between analyst and informant? How has placing a people elsewhere, outside modern (Western) civilization, and in another time, outside modern (Western) history, been a crucial analytic move in bounding a social formation as an object of knowledge? More simply and pertinently, Why were Agnes Mattz’s conditions of work and her residence in Oakland, rather than Smith River, irrelevant to the project of describing and analyzing the Tolowa?

If we do not think they were irrelevant, pursuing how they were relevant, and more ambitiously, fashioning an analysis of the Tolowa as a people with history as well as “tradition,” requires that we pose some difficult questions. How did colonial systems, nation states, and capitalist economies affect the ethnographic particulars of what the Tolowa were and became? How have national projects and capitalist civilization shaped the disciplinary conditions of what anthropology was and became? Why was the exclusion of a woman’s contemporary work, place, and time necessary to a particular kind of anthropological account of an American Indian culture, even though that work, place, and time were not unusual?

The bulk of this book is concerned with language, place, and history, on a broad scale and in a Tolowan microcosm. There are many reasons why we should link ethnohistorical description to apparent abstractions such as “capitalism” or “anthropology’s development.” Let me briefly discuss one connection between ethnohistory and disciplinary development. The 1920s effort to place women such as Agnes Mattz in gainful urban employment, while also agitating for their citizenship rights, goes back to the 1880s birth of white advocacy for Indian *civil* rights. The 1880s reform movement, genuinely concerned by the desperate circumstances of recently subjugated Native peoples, also accepted the federal Allotment Acts of the 1880s as inevitable and irreversible. The Allotment Acts individualized Indian lands; for the white

reformers of the 1880s and 1920s, Indian assimilation into American society, though long delayed, was finally unavoidable. Hence it was necessary to secure individual Indian rights.

The end of the Wars of the West in the 1870s and the subsequent passage of the Allotment Acts were major impetuses for the first wave of institutionalizing and professionalizing American anthropology. One of the first national linguistic surveys of Native North America, and a foundation for all subsequent work, was conducted by J.W. Powell in the 1880s and published in 1891. Powell's survey and classification of native peoples, cultures, and languages was commissioned by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (Powell, 1891). It was a description and inventory of indigenous languages, on a continental scale, and it contains a brief discussion of tribal lands, which refers to his other work preparing the land surveys for the Allotment Acts of the 1880s. Decollectivizing Indian land holdings, the Allotment Acts turned tribal lands into eighty-acre family plots. Allotment was an ambitious effort at forcibly integrating Indians into the American economy and polity. In this it was largely a failure, and one major outcome of allotment was massive land loss of tens of millions of acres of aboriginal territories. At the time, non-Indians seem to have viewed the allotment legislation and process as a harsh but necessary step in "civilizing" the "savage." As Feit (1991) has argued in a critical analysis of anthropologists' role in the interpretation of tribal territorialities, Powell brought evolutionary ideas directly into the policy debates about Indians and allotments. Concern with the intellectual justification of white expropriation of Indian territories or, conversely, of Indian rights to their property, informed the thinking of Powell's generation of American anthropologists as well as that of the subsequent Boasian anthropologists (Feit, 1991; Hinsley, 1981).

The misery and poverty of Native Americans following conquest and allotment-expropriation are well known, and they are not unusual conditions. Far from being unique to North America, expropriation and impoverishment could be characterized as normal experiences of aboriginal peoples worldwide, following their subjugation by colonial systems and nation states. Indigenous peoples, the exemplary objects of the anthropological knowledge making, are throughout the world found at the bottom of the political and economic heap. Prized for their esoteric backgrounds and knowledge, they work in kitchens, cut cane, struggle to farm. This should lead us to ask an obvious but largely ignored question about the relationship between cultural distinctness and social subjugation. Asking this question puts in a very different light the recent American celebration of cultural diversity, for social difference has not long been valued in the United States or Europe, and some of the West's most valued political ideals have historically rested on a crude ranking of peoples in which different meant not equal. Bringing the issue

back to Agnes Mattz, we may ask why her knowledge and memory of a traditional culture was of value to an ethnographic inquiry, but her place in relocated domestic service work was of no theoretical interest?

The chapters that follow develop this line of questioning and analysis. They begin with what we can know about Tolowa circumstances in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, historicizing the “tradition” that was the object of DuBois’ analysis, and contextualizing Agnes Mattz’s condition, as fullblood and domestic worker, in a more general analysis of forces affecting and changing Tolowa lifeways. The dramas of domination, transformation, and resistance, found variously in the histories of Native American peoples, occur in bold relief in the case of the Tolowa. They were a small society, and American settlement of California and destruction of native peoples was unusually abrupt and brutal. Notwithstanding the storms of history, various Tolowa have persisted, out of necessity and choice, seeking and living alternatives to the dominant American order up through the last decades of the twentieth century. Their story raises numerous important questions about historical inquiry, about continuities and tradition, discontinuities and innovation, about puzzles of similarity and difference.

The first three chapters address several problems in the awareness and writing of history. They begin with the enigma of difference in the fieldwork encounter, how to recognize in apparently assimilated people the social differences that point to alternative traditions. Situating this enigma in two conventional stereotypes about “vanishing” and “traditional” Indians, I discuss gaps in the historical and ethnographic record. Although the Tolowa are well-documented as to traditional culture, almost nothing is written about their twentieth-century circumstances, except for historical study *they themselves* have undertaken or commissioned. This lack of academic historical interest suggests a static view of tradition and culture, connected to a familiar paradigm of salvage ethnography and linguistics in which pre-contact traditional cultures and speech traditions would be reconstructed out of the debris of the present. But if the image of salvage after the storm of conquest and development no longer serves as a primary rationale for anthropology’s interests and knowledge, that does not mean that a storm has not occurred. Like other California peoples, the Tolowa were nearly destroyed in the nineteenth century, and they have lived most of the twentieth century as a struggling minority in a white-dominated rural context unreceptive where not hostile of Indian identities and claims.

Any effort at historical understanding of the Tolowa, whether their effort at self-understanding or my effort at an external account, confronts various difficulties. Some difficulties concern documentation, as the local histories written until recently are from settler perspective and sympathy, while the Indian histories were oral and they record a different vision of the past. How do we

reconcile versions? Other difficulties are more abstract and conceptual. Is the object of historical analysis a reasonably stable entity, “the Tolowa,” a people, who traverse through time unchanged in essential aspects? Or must we conceive of the Tolowa as an historical process, a social formation in the making and unmaking? Must we understand their identity neither as unchanging nor purely flexible, but as constructed against different, changing historical conditions?

The latter perspective frames my analysis, and the actual historical narrative, presented in the first three chapters, is organized as follows: Chapter One begins with contemporary fieldwork encounters, developing a sense of alternative traditions that lie behind initial cultural similarities. Using ethnographic and historical materials, it then discusses what is known about pre-contact Tolowa circumstances. These were the early- to mid-nineteenth century years, when a village-based Athabaskan people, *x̄dsh*, lived a reasonable social autonomy. They were not disconnected from local and regional intertribal exchanges—of marriage partners, of foodstuffs and ceremonial valuables, of cultural beliefs and linguistic influences; nor were they unaffected by the colonial systems to the north and south; nor were they undivided by internal conflicts and oppressions. But they were living what can legitimately be called “life on their own terms”: With economic resources under their control; with forms of kinship and spiritual practice intact; with a shared language and story tradition.

These terms of life changed drastically with the 1849 Gold Rush and the American settlement of California and Oregon. This change is the subject of Chapters Two and Three. “After the Cataclysm” details the disruptions and dying that followed initial contact with settler society, yet also argues for the maintenance, on the margins of settler society, of Tolowa social alternatives separate from American culture and power. Focusing upon the vicissitudes of subsistence strategies, forms of political authority, and ceremonial life, it argues for a transitional period, in which important social continuities are maintained from the pre-Contact period, although the Tolowa face devastating pressures on their way of life. “Conscripts of Western Civilization” describes a twentieth century of improved Indian-white relations and improved Tolowa conditions, including a rebounding population base, but it also describes a new era of rights that paradoxically marked the erosion of alternatives to American hegemony. For the emerging discourses of Indian rights, themselves local campaigns in a national movement, presumed some crucial issues: (1) that the loss of land was irredeemable; (2) that political strategy must proceed via legislative and judicial frameworks far removed from Tolowa control; and (3) that identity, rights, and place were heretofore linked, and heretofore adjudicated, in these new frameworks.

Having developed an analysis of Tolowa history in Chapters One to Three, I expand the scope of argument in the next two chapters, assessing the general significance of the historical processes constraining the Tolowa past and present, and focusing on the relation between rights discourses and processes of expropriation. Chapter Four begins with a brief discussion of Tolowa land loss and subsequent rights advocacy, arguing that the loss of territory and the emergence of rights must be seen as part of a single dialectical movement. Conceptions of rights—individual, civil, and human—are part of our most important political legacies from the European Enlightenment. Enlightenment rights discourses have tended to universalism: The framework of rights, if not particular rights, are to apply to all humans. But rights discourses have also been part of profound social transformations, and they have played an important role in the creation of Western hegemonies in law, politics, and economics. In order to understand the relations between the universalizing conceptions and the historical transformations, we must historicize our conceptions of rights, appreciating them as political ideals, but also acknowledging their roles in specific processes of domination. The contingent, complexly unstable nature of apparently universal human rights stands forth when we examine how nation-states secure rights by demarcating domains of politics, equality, and difference. These demarcations have historically co-occurred with the expropriation of landed peoples during the establishing of capitalist economic systems; with the emergence of formal political equality, always in unstable symbiosis with manifest social inequality; and with the construction of an atomized, masculine modern individual, as the rights-bearing exemplar.

These are processes that define modern Western political culture, as well as erstwhile indigenous “others.” A critical analysis of political theory, legal discourses, and symbolic categories shows that the struggles of indigenous peoples within and against modern nation-states are not exotic or marginal critiques of the existing order. They are efforts at securing survival and self-determination, on shifting historical terrain, and they overlap with the efforts of other social groups, for example, the modern feminist movement. The link with feminism is not superficial, rather it is in response to the centrality of patriarchy as a cultural *a priori* in Western capitalist nations. For Enlightenment political theorists women were naturally subordinate to free and equal men; in liberal states such as Andrew Jackson’s America, Indian “children” were naturally subordinate to white “fathers.” In both the longer term Enlightenment political theory as well as the more specific Jacksonian policy, categories of gender and race were prominent in discourses about rights that were also rationales for expropriation. The Enlightenment discourse entered into a colonial framework of property law, and the Jacksonian policy was part of an evolving strategy for the United States’ encounters with indigenous

people. (It is a necessary and now well-developed criticism of the discipline of anthropology that it long neglected those historical discourses, and the gender categories they deployed, as having a role in the societies anthropology studied, or in the development of the discipline.)

The question of how to understand continuity and change has long bedeviled the social sciences, and it is central to the current debates within anthropology about “authenticity” and “tradition.” The issue, if not the current framing of it, is quite old and familiar in the study of Indian/White relations in the United States. The emergence of the United States as the pre-eminent national power in North America profoundly altered the conditions for Indian social survival. Chapter Five discusses those altered conditions, on a national scale, and explores two centuries of efforts by native peoples to live alternatives to American domination. Aboriginal territoriality was reframed and subordinated in federal law and policy, itself a development of colonial legal discourse. In the new law and policy Indian polities were redefined and treated as “domestic dependent nations,” a particular political status that incorporated a psychosymbolic relation of patriarchal fathers and submissive children into legal and administrative discourse. Over the last century and a half, Indian peoples have been periodically subjected to official reactions against dependency doctrine, and the reactions always take a free market form: compulsory individualization of Indian resources and their social subjectivities.

Indian responses to the shifting strategies of American domination have been themselves enormously varied and evolving. Over two centuries they have included warfare, a range of religious movements, judicial and legislative efforts, and extralegal direct political action. Indian statuses within a system of American political-economic hegemony, as well as their strategies of accommodation to and repudiation of that hegemony, raise important questions about modern politics, law, and culture. Gendered assumptions about the “public” and “private” in political, legal, and cultural realms underpin conventional accounts of how the United States functions as a democratic civil society. These assumptions and understandings, an Enlightenment legacy, run afoul of the specific legal statuses of Indian societies, the communal traditions that Indian evoke and use to challenge business as usual, and the problems of culture that Indians raise in the contemporary United States. In this important sense, Native American societies pose an ongoing critique of American society. It is, however, a critique of the subalterns, whose lands have been taken, whose religious traditions have been thrown into disarray, whose languages have been lost and whose histories have been ignored. As Gramsci argued, subaltern peoples must necessarily make themselves, at least in part, in the images of the dominant.

A singular feature of Native Americans, when compared to other Americans, is their claim to be from *here*, their claim to particular lands and indigenous origins. In Indian Country generally, arguments about place have been critical to arguments about identity and rights. Like other Indian peoples, the Tolowa assert archaic, autochthonous origins, descent from people who inhabited the area before the arrival of whites and their new social system. Chapter Six returns the argument to the Tolowa, analyzing discourses of place and belonging, and focusing upon both old and new practices and upon the use of arguments about place in arguments about identity and rights. It seeks to understand Tolowa assertions about indigenous territory in light of non-Indian ownership of most of Del Norte County.

For Tolowa language activists, the rich traditional toponymy, a finely differentiated system of place naming, is part of an endangered linguistic tradition, and has been subject to a conscious collecting of “old words.” Place names are now taught in language classes, collected in dictionaries, and used to remap traditional territory onto modern, non-Indian maps and places. The old practices of place-bound songs—for hunting, fishing, and gathering, for wealth-training and puberty rituals—have also undergone a change in their use. Once part of an everyday and seasonal anchoring of person and people to place, its resources and spirit powers, they are now part of a more conscious display of culture. They are performed at large ceremonial events, taught in language classes, and used as part of documentation, directed at official agencies, connecting kin geneologies to local places. As with all peoples, Tolowa stories are an important means of achieving orientation to place, both through extensive reference to place in cosmological accounts and intensive micro-orientation, a verbal “walking through” found in myth narratives. While traditional stories often organize a precise sense of local orientation, contemporary stories are less spatial, more historical: they are about loss of land and other resources. These tales of theft remind us of the Gramscian point: Subaltern strategies and resistances are often cast in dominant images, categories, and assumptions. In order to bring out this point more sharply, the final section of Chapter Five focuses upon the dominant idioms of place, the diverse discourses and strategies justifying American settlement and appropriation. In juxtaposing traditional and contemporary Tolowa discourses of place with the multifaceted rhetorics justifying expropriation, we gain appreciation both of the richly discursive and contested basis of claims to place and identity, and of the profoundly historical nature of such discourses and contests. This provides us both with an analytic perspective and a textured historical sense of the subject of the final chapter: the twentieth-century politics of place and identity among the Tolowa.

Although they are a small group, the Tolowa have a long history of involvement in statewide Indian activism, from the 1930s onward. If Agnes Mattz’s

grandfather negotiated and renegotiated the terms of increasing settler supremacy over Tolowa lives, and her grandson spearheaded a modern struggle to exert fishing rights, Agnes herself was a frequent attendee at meetings of the first formal Indian welfare and advocacy organization founded in Del Norte County. Recent activism, dating from the late 1960s, has been an effort to reclaim and remake collective identity and resources, in particular to reverse the disintegrative effects of federal termination during the early 1960s. Language activism, aimed at shoring up their embattled linguistic tradition, has been a centerpiece of the recent effort.

Chapter Seven develops a three-part analysis of the contemporary *work* of identity fashioning and place claiming, an analysis that examines individual recruitment to activism, the social organization of activism, and the legal-jural "problem of culture" that activists confront. Questions of place and identity inform each part. Claims to identity and place commingle and conflict in the organizations and networks of cultural and political activity. In the 1930s a countywide organization spoke for the Tolowa and the neighboring Yurok; from the 1950s to the 1970s, a Smith River organization seemed to shut out nearby peoples, whereas the language program, functioning since the 1960s, has always promoted a broad sense of Tolowa identity; and in the last few years congressional legislation has forced a clear distinction between Tolowa and the neighboring Yurok, despite the intermarriage of many families. The legal-jural problem of culture stems from the disjunction between an external legal/academic framework assuming tribes and fixed identities and internal or local practices, based upon small-scale forms of social organization, allegiance, and identity. It is, however, precisely that legal/academic framework which holds external authority, and which must be engaged and drawn upon when fashioning legal claims to group identity and place-bound resource rights.

In its twentieth-century history, anthropology has as often ignored as investigated the complex discursivity of social life, the role of domination in the constitution of non-Western peoples, the dynamics of gender in the political formation of the West as well as in apparently holistic societies. Identity politics, much celebrated a decade ago, has recently come in for extensive criticism. At issue are familiar themes: the grounds and nature of identity, the bases for solidarity, the relation between modern universalizing processes and categories (class structuring, citizenship) and the quest for a better life and a better society. These themes form a matrix for investigating both the specificity of Indian political subjectivities and the sharedness of their struggles with other social groups.

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## Tolowa Histories

### Inclusions and Exclusions in Making a People and a Past

#### INTRODUCTION

The Tolowa, along with the rest of Native California, have been referred to as “submerged peoples.” The term was first used by Sherburne Cook in his pioneering study of conflicts between Californian peoples and Spanish, then American civilization (1976). Cook intended a historical sense to the term. Unlike other Indian peoples, who were fought, eventually conquered, and placed onto distinct Indian lands called reservations, in a process that took decades and sometimes centuries, Native Californians were rapidly attacked, overrun, and decimated, in a matter of ten to twenty years. No special Indian lands were set aside, instead settler society seemed to submerge these small-scale social formations, leaving survivors existing in what seemed to be nooks and crannies in rural California. The term “submerged” was later used by Edward Spicer (1969), who gives a more contemporary sense to the word. In the 1950s and 1960s, Native Californians seemed “submerged” in the prosperous American surroundings. Lacking reservations, with aboriginal languages extinct or moribund, with recent federal Termination having ended the claims of many to tribal status, California Indians seemed swept well into acculturation and assimilation.

It is the result of several major features of California history that this state should have many “submerged peoples,” that is, indigenous peoples apparently overwhelmed by and assimilated to the larger American society. First, there was major legal chicanery in white/Indian relations: treaties negotiated in the 1850s with native peoples were never ratified, so a fundamental native claim on legal status, identity, and rights was voided, at least for much of the first century of American settlement. Second, many Native

California societies were small-scale, with decentralized authority structures, and their political forms fit awkwardly with a language of “tribes” imposed by American power. Finally, the history of encounter was exceptionally brutal. Extermination, not containment, was de facto settler policy in the 1870s and 1880s (Cook, 1976; Norton, 1979; Rawls, 1984). As Cook and Spicer differently noted, California peoples had held onto forms of kinship, occasional ceremonial gatherings, and bits of land that marked and maintained their Indianness, but Indian persistence and identity have necessarily involved much accommodation to new forms of power, much reclaiming of interrupted or underground traditions.

In this and subsequent chapters we will explore the main contours of Tolowa history, both before and after their encounter with white American society, attending carefully to local product and external condition. In so doing, we will work against two pervasive myths about Indians: (1) that they are “vanishing peoples,” who did once nobly exist but do no longer; and (2) that their societies were static, that is, that “real” Indians are those in the past, rather than the historically changing people living in the present (see Spicer, 1969, on these myths). Rather than starting with an account of the distant past, let us begin with an outsider’s entree to contemporary Tolowa circumstances, a story of fieldwork encounters. In this way, we can try to establish Fabian’s (1983) “coevalness,” a sharing of time between analyst and people studied. In the case at hand, such coevalness concerns both the recent time of fieldwork, and the longer time of an expansive nation state and the native social formations it overran. We will begin with the recent time of fieldwork, in particular, my encounters with an imperiled linguistic tradition, with an apparently “submerged people.”

## TOLOWA TRANSITIONS: THE ENIGMA OF SAMENESS AND DIFFERENCE IN THE FIELDWORK ENCOUNTER

My first contact with Tolowa people occurred in December 1981, for purposes of beginning a linguistic study of the language. This California Athabaskan language was on the verge of dying out, but there were a few speakers left, and a senior colleague who had worked on related languages was putting me in touch with one of them. That speaker was Ed Richards Jr., and he was the first of a fistful of language consultants that I worked with over the next five years or so, when occupational, personal, and financial circumstances permitted visits to the Smith River region.

Then eighty-one, Ed lived with his daughter and her family in a modest bungalow on the Smith River Rancheria, on a rocky bluff literally a stone’s

throw from the turbulent North Pacific. At his preference we usually conducted our linguistic sessions at my motel room in nearby Crescent City, the small county seat of rural Del Norte County. Ed always arrived promptly at 9:00 A.M., in his new red pickup truck, and I would have gone out for coffee and doughnuts, which we enjoyed before settling down to the drier business of eliciting word sets that illustrated sound structure and word-forming patterns in the language. A small man, still solidly built across the chest and arms, with a large belly, white hair, something asiatic about his eyes, and very fair skin, Ed looked like someone's grandfather, as he was. He talked often about his life, especially the work, as a ranch hand inland from Smith River, as a timber cutter, log roller, and sawman in one of the seven mills that had flourished in Del Norte but were now in drastic decline, and as the co-owner of a bar that seemed to have failed. As he talked I was reminded of finishing high school in Eastern Oregon, of work in feed lots stacking hay and stringing fence, of summer work in the emerging potato agribusiness, fourteen hours a day of eating dust and machine noise for \$1.75 an hour, and good money at that. I was struck by how like other rural people contemporary Indians were, with their pickup trucks and old cars, poor-to-modest housing in sometimes lovely places, and the closeness of make-do manual work and poverty.

But if Ed Richards seemed like another rural grandfather with his stories of physical labor, his housing, his truck, and his enthusiasm for a *Denny's* breakfast (an enthusiasm I shared), if he seemed a small-town fellow who just happened to know an exotic language, he also presented another side. For one thing, his housing was on the rancheria, sixty or so acres on a narrow strip along the Pacific, looped by Indian Road. At the north end of the loop was an old, white wooden church, the Indian Shaker Church, a mixing of Christian belief and Indian prophecy, which had come down the coast from the Yakima reservation in the 1920s. Between the church and Ed's home was the Indian cemetery, the *How on quet* Indian cemetery, of which Ed was then the caretaker. The cemetery was named after one of the major Tolowa villages that had been located near the high oceanside bluff that the current Rancheria spans.<sup>1</sup> The cemetery was not affiliated with any particular denomination, rather it was a place where Indian people of the immediate Howonquet region as well as other Tolowa could bury their own.

Ed also told stories in and about the "Indian language." He talked about how he knew the language (it had been his first tongue) because his mother only talked the Indian language to him, refusing English, though he had later learned English from siblings and going to school. Though the Tolowa language had largely been replaced by English, for most people for many decades, he recalled recent situations of "just talking Indian" in the special settings of close friends, in all-male and all-Indian gatherings. He also told

stories, in English and Tolowa, about Coyote's foolishness and sexual misbehavior, and about how Crow got his color by not following instructions.

Finally, in an area dotted with small churches, Ed was skeptical about God and about preachers. He provided the Tolowa word for preacher, *d̄d̄geena'ah* and translated it as 'the talking upwards one' with a laugh. He recalled his friends who knew songs that would give you luck, and he mentioned on numerous occasions Amelia Brown, who had known about Indian herbal medicine as well as traditional food gathering and preparing.

The rancheria and cemetery, the linguistic alternative, and the skepticism about Christianity complicated any simple assumptions about Ed's assimilation to wage labor, modern conveniences, and "American" identity. It all seemed to point to other traditions, to other pasts that bore on the present. This pattern of initial similarity followed by a deepening sense of dissimilarity was repeated as I worked with other language consultants. I will mention just two, and briefly.

I first began consulting with diminutive, congenial, and chain-smoking Berneice Humphrey in the mid-1980s, when she had more than two decades' experience working with the Tolowa Language Program. She had lived on military bases in the Southeast and Midwest during her young married life, had run a cafe near Fort Bragg on the California coast; she decried hippies and environmentalists and she spoke fondly of the Westbrooks, a wealthy white family that owned much of the nearby land and that many Indians did not speak well of; and she owned her own home, enjoyed a meal out in town, and always drove a late-model car. But Berneice was also the eldest daughter of the renowned Amelia Brown. Indeed, she had initially gotten involved in the late-1960s effort to document the Tolowa language through her mother, whom she adored, and then she had continued, teaching courses in the local high school, and co-compiling two editions of the *Tolowa Language* dictionary, grammar, and cultural resource book. Berneice enjoyed hunting for and brewing *esday x̄d̄msreene* 'swamp tea,' and in the mid- and late-1980s, she "loaned" her salmon fishing rights to a nephew, who reciprocated by bringing her and her sisters part of the catch. She talked with obvious displeasure about a local motel that had a self-proclaimed Indian Museum, a collection of dance dresses and other ceremonial regalia, which in her view had been stolen from local Indian people.

Loren Bommelyn is a man my own age, whom I first met in 1981, and who I have talked with, consulted with, and called upon in various ways in the last dozen years. He is a tireless contributor to the Tolowa cultural scene. Loren was initially Berneice's assistant in the language program, although he assumed majority responsibility for the work of dictionary compiling and in the early 1980s became the head teacher in the language program at the local