

# How Environmental Decline Restructures Indigenous Gender Practices: What Happens to Karuk Masculinity When There Are No Fish?

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## Abstract

On the Klamath River in northern California, Karuk tribal fishermen traditionally provide salmon for food and ceremonies, yet the region has sustained serious environmental degradation in recent years. What happens to Karuk masculinity when there are no fish? Using interviews and public testimony, the authors examine how declining salmon runs affect the gender identities and practices of Karuk fishermen. Gendered practices associated with fishing serve ecological functions, perpetuate culture in the face of structural genocide, and unite families and communities. The authors find that the absence of fish resulting from ecological damage affects both food availability and the quality of social connections, which in turn affects individual gender practices and symbolizes genocide to the community. Karuk men's individual struggles to construct themselves as men are thus interwoven with struggles against racism and ongoing colonialism. The authors coin the term *colonial ecological violence* to describe these circumstances. They also describe how some men restructure masculine identities by transferring "traditional" cultural responsibilities to fish, community, and "collective continuance" to new settings as activists and fishery scientists. The authors call for a decolonized sociology that uses more theorizing of the particular and very real ways ecological relationships structure gender in traditional Native communities to understand the operation of gendered and racialized colonial violence in the form of environmental degradation, today.

## Keywords

indigenous, colonialism, environment, masculinity, racism, Karuk

It's an important role in being a man in the tribe . . . you know . . . you fish for your family, you fish for the people . . . And there's fish days, and the ones who owned those fish days were responsible for feeding the community . . .

Karuk fisherman and father

It's been a way of life for as long as I can remember. My grandfather and his parents and on and on have been fishermen. I can't imagine life without having a whole line of fishermen. I don't even know how to compare it to someone else because it's just such a big part of who I am. Our whole culture . . .

Karuk woman, weaver in her 40s

If fishing and hunting and providing for your family is what makes you a man, then if you are

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not able fulfill those things, how do you prove that? How do you show that?

Karuk mother in her 30s

For millennia, the Klamath River in northern California was the third largest salmon-producing river in the western United States, making the Karuk some of the wealthiest people in the region. Fish are a gift from the *Iksarëyav*, or Spirit People, and an important food source in a now impoverished rural region. Harvesting, preparing, and sharing fish continue to organize important material and symbolic features of social life. The right and responsibility to fish at specific sites is an honor passed down through families. Participation in fishing is an informal rite of passage for young men and a valued social role for adults. The impacts of environmentally damaging non-Native management policies have severely degraded salmon populations.<sup>1</sup> As a result, Karuk fishermen are no longer able to perform traditional activities or are only able to do so in a limited way.<sup>2</sup> What happens to Karuk masculinities when there are no fish? How are “traditional”<sup>3</sup> Karuk gender constructions simultaneously about racial resistance and resistance to colonialism? What options exist for the restructuring of gender practices in light of environmental decline?

Twenty-five years ago, Snipp (1992) observed that “American Indians have remained outside ordinary sociological inquiry” (p. 352), a trend that has unfortunately continued. A series of recent articles highlights the need for sociology of race and ethnicity to better theorize both North American colonialism and the experiences of indigenous peoples (Fenelon 2015; Glenn 2015; Steinman 2012, 2016). Sociologists of race and ethnicity have scarcely examined indigenous masculinity, much less the relationships among masculinity, colonialism, and environmental decline. Yet if intersectionality is a core strength of our present theory (Golash-Boza 2016), and the operation of gender and race are intimately connected (Crenshaw 1991), should we not also attend to how they operate in the processes of colonialism and decolonization? Whereas Native studies scholars detail relationships among racism, colonialism, gender, and the environment (e.g., Coulthard 2014; Innes and Anderson 2015), fewer sociologists have taken this path.

We use empirical data from Native men’s lives to describe the role of the natural environment in their constructions of masculinity, the operation of colonial violence, and how Karuk men resist racism and colonialism. With this case study of how environmental

decline reconfigures gender practices in the Karuk community, we seek to expand theoretical and empirical understanding of indigenous experience within sociology of race and ethnicity and to illustrate an intersectional analysis of the linkages between sexism, racism, and colonialism.

## RACE AND COLONIALISM

Until recently, indigenous experiences have been analyzed primarily by sociologists in strictly racial and ethnic terms or by using theories of internal colonialism (see discussion by Steinman 2016). Certainly race and ethnicity applies to indigenous peoples, indeed as Omi and Winant (2015) asserted, the conquest of North America was “the inauguration of racialization on a world-historical scale” (p. 112), and “the conquest, therefore, was the first—and . . . perhaps the greatest—racial formation project” (p. 112). Yet as Garrouette (2001) noted, “Specific elements of the racial formation process for Indian people make Native Americans’ experience unique” (p. 234). Omi and Winant described the period of frontier genocide and conquest as racial projects, yet failed to theorize how they were also colonial. Nor is attention paid in later application of racial formation theory to how colonialism intersects with ongoing racialization and racial formation. Although race and racism matter, we contend that the lens of race alone is insufficient to illustrate the dynamics of power-shaping indigenous communities. The state may be racial (Goldberg 2002), but sociologists of race and ethnicity have begun to note that it may be more appropriate to describe it as colonial (e.g., Steinmetz 2016). Theories of internal colonialism are nonetheless insufficient, in that they blend the experiences of multiple racial groups (Omi and Winant 2015), fail to theorize social and ecological relationships at large, and deploy the term *colonialism* as a metaphor rather than literal state structure. For these and other reasons, racial formation theory has been challenged to more adequately engage the theory of settler colonialism (Glenn 2015). According to the settler-colonial frame, North American colonialism is not limited to the overt genocide or forced assimilation of the past but rather is enacted through state institutional structures and cultural practices that continue to impoverish communities and erode sovereignty today (see Glenn 2015; Steinmetz 2014; Wolfe 2006).

Although both racism and colonialism describe how the state moves material resources from one group of people to another, most racial groups have

sought “equal” integration into society as the means to rectify racism. By contrast, overcoming colonialism requires a group to maintain its own long-standing social values, cultural practices, and economic and political structures. Attaining sovereignty, resisting assimilation, and “decolonization” are generally considered routes to rectifying oppression within Native communities (Bruyneel 2007; Coulthard 2014). Despite the observation by Snipp (1986) that “the broader significance of these arrangements is seldom recognized” (p. 145), most scholarship within the sociology of race and ethnicity continues to reflect what Steinman (2016) aptly called the “ubiquitous minoritizing conception of American Indians” (p. 219). As such, multiple aspects of Native American experiences, from their failure to assimilate or respond to antipoverty programs, have been viewed as mysterious.

In sum, both racism and colonialism matter for indigenous peoples. U.S. nation-state policies legitimate racism, racialized gender hierarchies, and capitalist commodity relations (Collins 2002; Goldberg 2009). Settler colonialism is a racialized and gendered set of social relations that fundamentally shape the existence of the U.S. nation-state as well as the social and ecological conditions we now analyze. In the United States, racism underpins colonialism. Both Golash-Boza (2016) and Omi and Winant (2015) emphasized that race is a construct of the colonizer. Today, in the face of more than a century of colonial occupation in northern California, Indian and Karuk have become real racial categories, as well as political identities within settler-colonial conditions.

## INTERSECTIONS OF RACISM, COLONIALISM, AND THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

We take an intersectional approach, underscoring the relationships among four axes of power: colonialism, race, environment, and gender (Collins 2002; Crenshaw 1991). Although there is a rich body of literature on race and environment (Bullard 2000; Pulido 2016), few scholars have taken up Lisa Park and David Pellow’s (2004) call to engage the central sociological theories on race to dynamics of environmental discrimination. Omi and Winant (2015) argued that to understand race and racism, we must understand the sociohistorical context in which they have emerged. Yet these sociohistorical contexts of power, wealth generation, and the construction of identity often overlook relationships with and manipulations of the natural

environment. Nevertheless, sociohistorical processes by which racial identities are “created, lived out, transformed and destroyed” (Omi and Winant 2015:109) have regularly relied on the abilities of groups to access or manipulate the natural environment in important ways. As Almaguer (1994) details for the development of white supremacy and California agriculture, it is often through controlling such relationships with the environment that race is constructed and wealth is moved from one racial category to another. In the case of Karuk people, present-day poverty has been manufactured through state processes that simultaneously manipulate the natural environment and develop or reinforce racial constructions of what it means to be “Indian” and “White.” The differentiation and hierarchical arrangement of racial categories (e.g., “civilized White” vs. “savage Indian”) are colonial constructs that significantly inform processes which criminalize traditional Karuk land management practices and replace them with the extraction of commodities such as gold, timber, and fish.

Relationships with the natural environment continue to be a central part of racialization and its resistance today and are particularly important for understanding settler colonialism, because settler colonialism centers on the appropriation of land (Coulthard 2014; Wolfe 2006). In the case of the Karuk, settler-colonial white supremacy has been enacted through a series of racial projects, beginning with direct genocide, the failure to ratify treaties, and continues with the imposition of U.S. Forest Service land management that promotes processes of forced assimilation (e.g., by the elimination of traditional foods) (see Norgaard 2014; Norgaard, Reed, and Van Horn 2011). The natural world remains a primary organizing principle of life for many indigenous peoples (Liebler 2010; Simpson 2014; Whyte 2013), and retaining relationships with the natural environment is a key feature of indigenous resistance movements (Clark 2002; Jacob 2013; Hall and Fenelon 2015; LaDuke 1999; Wetzel 2006; Wilkes 2006).

## MASCULINITY AS RACIAL AND COLONIAL RESISTANCE

Dominant gender norms are tied to white supremacy and likewise, in a settler-colonial context, to colonial domination (Collins and Bilge 2016; Coulthard 2014; Fenelon 2015), yet the absence of scholarship reflecting indigenous experience within sociology of race and ethnicity is echoed within sociological work on gender. One reason for

this gap may be the contemporary focus on theorizing gender as a social construction in ways that appear to make theorizing the natural world more difficult. As Anne Witz (2000) notes, “The very term ‘gender’ as it has come to be used within sociology and anthropology, linguistically denotes that which is not natural, although it is presumed to be” (p. 7). Against this backdrop, references to “nature” have been associated with essentialism. Yet for many indigenous communities, including those Karuk people we interviewed, “nature” in the form of plants, animals, rocks, and rivers is a central organizing feature of cosmologies and social lives including gender (Baldy 2013; Deloria 2003; Innes and Anderson 2015).

A second challenge for articulating indigenous experience may come from the dominant focus on masculinity as achieving and maintaining of one’s position within hierarchies of power. Masculinities are understood to change over time, and one key impetus for this change is their ability to sustain power relations (see Pascoe and Bridges 2015). Although understanding masculinity as hierarchy has been critical in the context in which it was developed, our data speak to the possibility that indigenous masculinity can be equally about “collective continuance,”<sup>4</sup> responsibility, and resistance to racism and colonialism (Whyte 2013). In contrast to emphases on masculinity as hierarchy, we describe how fishing, participating in ceremonies that regulate the fishery, and distributing fish to the community can each be understood as gender accomplishments that serve ecological functions, unite communities, and perpetuate culture in the face of settler colonialism.

Finally, people in the Karuk community place much importance on notions of *tradition* and “*traditional roles*” less commonly used within sociology. In making sense of the local salience of the concept, we draw on Udel’s (2016) analysis of Native women’s “motherwork” as emphasizing traditions of responsibility and on others who emphasize tradition as a strategy of “*racial resistance*.” Similarly, Vasquez and Wetzel (2009) describe how, in the context of racist social stigma, an emphasis on tradition is used to reassert social position and collective dignity:

Mexican Americans and Native Americans establish their social worth—that is their group’s social position and collective dignity—by making discursive comparisons with, and drawing distinctions from, the American mainstream. They evaluate themselves using a

metric that highlights their traditions, specifically their roots, values and cultural toolkits. (p. 1557)

We use *tradition* to refer to values, norms, worldview, and social practices that although not unaffected by outside influence, biologically inherent, historically fixed, or socially static, are nonetheless intensely meaningful to Karuk people.

As with other non-White groups, Karuk people experience racism, but traditional activities matter not only as resistance to racial stigma. For Native peoples, “tradition” actively resists colonialism (Fenelon 2015; Glenn 2015; Smith 1999). Just as the particular contours of Black masculinity have been understood in part as resisting racism (Carrington 1998), in the context of colonialism, maintaining “traditional” gender practices is a central part of cultural resurgence and survival, alongside the maintenance of political and economic systems (see, e.g., Tengan 2008; Anderson, Innes, and Swift 2012). On the Klamath River, policies that criminalize traditional Karuk land management, such as burning the forest or fishing, gathering, and hunting, also disrupt traditional gender practices and operate as powerful mechanisms of colonization through forced assimilation and impacts to tribal sovereignty (Norgaard 2014).

## STUDY AREA

The Klamath River begins in southern Oregon and flows south and west into the Pacific Ocean in northern California. The middle portion of the river is home to the Karuk Tribe, the second largest tribe in California, with more than 7,400 members and descendants. Karuk lifeways have been under assault, through direct genocide in the 1850s (Norton 1979; Madley 2016) and continuing into the present with forced assimilation (Norgaard 2014; Willette, Norgaard, and Reed 2016). Although the Karuk are federally recognized, they have no reservation and limited recognition of their rights to hunt, fish, or gather foods or care for the land in a traditional manner. Environmental decline, initiated by state actors, is a central feature of colonial violence in the Karuk community today. Dams were installed, diverting water resources to farmers in the upper basin, the policy of fire suppression allowed encroachment of conifers into acorn groves, and the extraction of timber generated commercial wealth that fueled an influx of Europeans into the area. When it comes to the river, dams have blocked access to 90 percent of the spawning habitat for spring Chinook salmon since

the 1960s. Dams also create warm water temperatures and have fostered the growth of dangerous cyanobacteria. Salmon have particularly important material and symbolic significance for Karuk people given that historically, they accounted for more than half the total calories and protein people consumed. Salmon continue to be an important food source and figure centrally in spiritual practices, stories, and the social organization of daily life (Norgaard 2005). Absence of traditional foods, like salmon, is a mechanism of forced assimilation, as people must replace the traditional subsistence economy with store-bought foods. Forced assimilation is even more overt when game wardens arrest people for fishing according to tribal custom.

## METHODS AND DATA

This project began with the proposed relicensing of a series of four dams known as the Klamath River Hydroelectric Project (see Norgaard 2005). Starting in 2003, Karuk cultural biologist and traditional dipnet fisherman Ron Reed and non-Native sociologist Kari Norgaard worked together to assess impacts of the dams on the health, culture, and economy of the Karuk Tribe. As an “insider,” Reed used his knowledge to frame relevant research questions, identify existing data sources, and gain access to participants. Information presented here is compiled from in-depth interviews with Karuk tribal members and archived testimonies from Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) dam relicensing hearings. In 2004, 18 open-ended, in-depth interviews provided detailed information from tribal members regarding health, diet, food access and consumption, and economic conditions. The gendered impacts of fisheries’ decline became apparent. To better understand the experiences of Karuk fisherman, in 2008, we conducted 25 additional interviews with traditional fishermen and their families and reanalyzed the 2004 interviews and the FERC testimony for content on gender constructions and gendered impacts. Because dipnet fishing is a masculine activity in Karuk culture, our interview sample contains more men ( $n = 19$ ) than women ( $n = 6$ ). Our sampling reflected our central focus on men’s experiences, but we used interviews with women to contextualize men’s accounts. Interviewees were selected via theoretical sampling to reflect a range of ages and experiences of men from fishing families throughout the 100-mile length of the watershed within Karuk ancestral territory. Our sampling purposely included men who

had more access to fishing because of their location near the ceremonial fishery and men who had less access either because they lived farther away or came from families who were more assimilated. Interviewees ranged in age from their early 20s to their late 60s. Interview questions centered on descriptive aspects of fishing, the meaning of fish and fishing in men’s lives and the lives of their families and the community, the meaning of recent declines in fish populations, and how men coped with these declines. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded.

No software program was used for data coding; rather, transcripts were carefully studied for emergent themes relating to the experience of fishing, the Klamath River, and environmental decline. Initial themes of identity, community, responsibility, tradition, and resistance were immediately apparent. After initial codes were developed, all transcripts were read again multiple times to identify additional themes and refine analytic categories. During this rereading, additional themes of colonialism, ecological violence, and anticolonial resistance were developed. Norgaard used analytic memos and constructed tables to discern relationships between codes and, for example, how identity is related to environmental decline, colonialism, and resistance. Furthermore, the authors spent many hours in conversation during the period we conducted interviews (often in the course of driving the long distances up and down the Klamath River to reach respondents). These conversations were important opportunities to discuss relationships between themes and bridge gap between Reed’s understandings as a Karuk insider and Norgaard’s understandings as a non-Native academic. A third layer of analysis occurred when J. M. Bacon joined our team. At this point, additional concepts from masculinity literature, including tensions with theory on masculinity as hierarchy, were identified within the transcripts and were elevated to important themes within the analysis. Bacon was also instrumental in refining our conception of the operation of colonialism vis-à-vis environmental decline.<sup>5</sup>

Although confidentiality and anonymity are the norm in sociological research, best research practices in Native communities identify speakers to give credit for intellectual property, especially when traditional knowledge is shared (Smith 1999). We present voices without names here because passages articulate personal experiences and do not contain traditional knowledge. We shared the final article with interviewees and received permission to use quotations in specific

contexts (Denzin, Lincoln, and Smith 2008; Smith 1999).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We find that the natural environment has a central influence on constructions of Karuk masculinity. Men interviewed related anger, grief, guilt, and shame over of the absence of salmon in the river and their consequent inability to perform social responsibilities for their families and communities. The negative experiences these men described have significant material and symbolic impacts. The absence of fish affects both food availability and the quality of social networks, which in turn affect identity and practices. Men's individual struggles to construct themselves as men are interwoven with struggles against racism and colonial ecological violence (see also Bacon in preparation). The absence of fish and the inability of men to perform traditional masculinity also symbolize cultural genocide to the community. Finally, we show how some men restructure masculinities through engagement in environmental activism and biological research in ways that refashion traditional Karuk values of responsibility to fish, community, and collective continuance in new settings.

### *Constructing Traditional Karuk Masculinity: Responsibilities to Fish, Family, Community, and Collective Continuance*

Since time immemorial, Karuk people have held responsibilities to tend and care for the food and cultural-use species they consider relatives. These species flourish as people who manage the landscape through burning, digging, prayer, and other activities. Many such traditional management tasks are gender specific. For men from fishing families, fishing comes with a set of responsibilities to family, community, and to the fish themselves. Tending, harvesting, sharing, and consuming are part of a pact across species. Leaf Hillman, director of the Karuk Department of Natural Resources, explains,

We believe that we were put here in the beginning of time, and we have an obligation, a responsibility, to take care of our relations, because hopefully, they'll take care of us. And it's an obligation that we have, and so just like—we say, well, we have to fish. They say, "Well, there aren't that many fish this year, so I don't think you should be fishing." That is a violation of our law. Because it's failure on our

part to uphold our end of the responsibility. If we don't fish, we don't catch fish, consume fish . . . then the salmon have no reason to return. They'll die of a broken heart.

Other traditional activities that people do to fulfill their responsibilities to the natural world include ceremonial management of the fishery to ensure "escapement" and burning of the forest to enhance runoff. These dimensions of reciprocity are key social and cultural values. Karuk fishermen have responsibilities to the human community as well as through the provision of fish. As one woman in her 40s from a prominent fishing family describes,

My family when they go fishing, they go fishing for all the Elders not just our grandparents or great aunties and uncles. They go up to the tribal council and give out fish to the Elders. They take that responsibility very seriously.

The role of community provider is a crucial aspect of fishermen's identity and a source of pride. Fisherman Ron Reed reflected on this pride, as well as how it connects him to both the earth and his people across time, an experience of collective continuance: "Being able to fish for people, for the ceremonies. There's a great deal of pride being able to deliver fish to people. It connects you to the earth, it connects you to *pananahouikum*, the people that walk before us." Because it is men who fish, carrying out this responsibility is deeply entwined with gender identity.<sup>6</sup> One mother in her early 30s described the importance of managing resources for men's sense of what it means to be a man:

It's like that is what is what makes them a man, it's part of who they are. Fishing and hunting and forest management . . . those are what makes a man a man . . . you know and I so I think that they're really excited to get to participate in those kind of things and take great pride in it.<sup>7</sup>

The traditional knowledge embedded in these practices is key for individual identity, cultural, and ecological continuity (McGregor 2008).<sup>8</sup> Another younger fisherman in his early 20s explains,

I've actually dipped my first time last year and it felt good. I want my son to do that . . . and it's an important role in being a man in the tribe . . . you know . . . you fish for your family, you fish for the people . . .

That one's first time "dipping" and other aspects of fishing serve as an informal rite of passage for boys and young adults further underscores the importance of fishing to Karuk and masculine identity. As families fish, boys learn a host of skills and traditional values. As coauthor Ron Reed explains,

Originally, you had family rites down at Ishi Pishi Falls. Now kids are just going through life and living, but actually they're being trained at a very young age. You teach them how to go down, carrying them down there as a baby and getting them familiar with the Falls, and pretty soon, the next thing you know, they're walking. You take them down and let them go as far as they can. The next thing you know, now they're walking all the way down. Pretty soon, they're packing little Jack out [smaller salmon]. Now they're packing the salmon out. Pretty soon, they're clubbing for you, they're cleaning fish and packing them out. Then actually giving them to Elders and learning how to process fish, how to gather the materials for your fish poles, and how to do all those type of things.

Although present scholarship emphasizes how social context and setting structure the ways people "do gender" (West and Zimmerman 1987), here the natural world is central in Karuk constructions of masculine identity. Karuk masculinity is not only about the act of fishing, or even the act of actually catching a fish, but about participation in responsibilities to fish, family, community, and the future, each of which can be enacted *only if ecological conditions are right*.

The presence of specific ecological conditions also informs how boys and men come to internalize masculine identities. One middle-aged man from a traditional family reflects on his understanding of his importance in the community and sense of responsibility in the course of providing for his people:

I killed my first deer when I was about 12 years old. It was a big four-pointer and one of the things that really sticks in my mind right now, is that after my brothers cut it up, gutted it, at that time, I realized that I was an important part of our society, because I was able to give meat to my aunts, my great-aunts, my uncles. Even today when I catch fish in the falls, I don't bring fish home. I give it away to Elders. People who don't have kids who can go down and pack fish up for them. I take fish to these people.

Being "Karuk" is shaped by race, gender, colonialism, and ecological conditions. The act of fishing simultaneously confirms one's identity as a *man* and *Karuk*, as this mother alludes:

I think that that's one of the things we end up with today because we have a limited view of roles. It's like you're either a fisherman or. . . . If you are a guy, you gotta be a fisherman. You don't want young boys to think, "I've never been to the falls to fish" you know, "so maybe I'm not quite the Indian that someone else is who goes to the falls and fishes."

For Karuk men with whom we spoke, Karuk masculinity becomes synonymous with enacting these responsibilities. *Environmental* conditions make possible sense of self, social interactions, and social structure. But as the speaker notes, with the decline of salmon, these Karuk constructions of gender are vulnerable today.

### *Changing Environment, Changing Masculinities: What Happens to Karuk Masculinity When There Are No Fish?*

Park and Pellow (2004) claimed that racial formation and institutional racism are a "complex set of practices supported by the linked exploitation of people and natural resources" (p. 403). Racialization and colonialism via environmental policy are ongoing. Despite the significance of earlier environmental impacts such as hydraulic mining and overfishing in the early 1900s, the testimony of adults and Elders indicates that very damaging impacts to the abundance of fish occurred within the lifetimes of most adult Karuk people today. Whereas many people reported eating salmon up three times per day during fishing season in the 1980s, by 2005, the tribe of more than 3,500 people caught fewer than 100 fish at Ishi Pishi Falls the entire year. Present-day conditions of poverty and hunger have been produced through state processes of environmental manipulation at the same time as they impose constructions of what it meant to be "Indian." These environmental changes have drastic implications for Karuk men in particular. The way one woman on her 30s who worked for a tribal prevention program understands it,

I think that traditionally you know there are pretty strong gender roles and roles for individuals within the community and when

you can't fulfill those roles, that's when we start to have problems like drug and alcohol abuse even domestic violence and child abuse. This is just my perspective, but I think if fishing and hunting and providing for your family is what makes you a man, then if you are not able fulfill those things, how do you prove that? How do you show that?

Gender performances are not merely of individual consequence but hold racial meanings and are fundamentally necessary for Karuk culture to continue. Connell (1990) wrote,

It follows that any particular form of masculinity can be analyzed as both a personal project and a collective project. Conflicts over a form of masculinity similarly have two levels, in which rather different things are at stake. On one level, alternative transformations of personal life are at stake; on the other, alternative futures of the collective gender order. (p. 454)

Thus, men who were unable to uphold their responsibilities felt not only an individual sense of shame or status loss, but also guilt in relation to their community responsibilities as this fisherman describes:

Elders are always trying to give you money, and you know, you respectfully deny it, and then some Elders respectfully demand that you take it. And so there's prayer in return. And when you do that, you're living the good life. You're giving people fish, you're doing what you're supposed to do. But when you're not able to do that, there's a sense of emptiness, there's a sense of not meeting your responsibility. When people tell you, they hadn't had fish in five years. Or three years, or two years, or I haven't eaten eel in ten years. Your Elders yearning for the food, and you know, it's a scary situation to be in. All of traditional fishermen back in the day, you're supposed to take care of your family first. Your family was taken care of first, then you reached out to the other community members, and now it's impossible to do that.

People also describe stress as the inability to fulfill responsibilities to the Creator,<sup>9</sup> to particular species, and to the human community. In the words of one young man, "If an Elder is asking you to go fish for him, that's like an honor, and if you can't fulfill that honor, it's kind of degrading inside, you

know, it's hard on the spirit." Another older fisherman from the same community describes how the inability to "make things right" both for the fish and human community weighs heavily on those who carry this responsibility:

I see this with my own family, people in the community, they feel responsible in part for what's happened with the fish. Not that they caused the degradation [crying]. But what else can you do? You can only do so much. You know, you can make your prayers, you can rally, you can go down there and pray at the falls, you can go to the ceremonies, but at some point you know, it's just beyond your ability to do something and when you reach that point where you can only do so much, and you can't do anymore, that's when it's lost [crying]. You know? And, when you see your role as a young man or as a person who's supposed to get fish and go feed these people so they can have that ceremony so they can fix the Earth, fix the world—you go down and you look below the bridge and there's more dead [crying]. You can't be the one who makes the water ten degrees cooler.

Although changing environmental conditions affect the gender performances in unique ways, they appear to be particularly damaging for men. One person described how many of women's traditional activities (parenting young children, tending and harvesting forest foods, and basketry materials) are *relatively* available.<sup>10</sup> Masculine identified activities of hunting and fishing have been more acutely affected by environmental decline and state regulation. Udel (2016) similarly noted this phenomenon on a more general level:

In the face of coerced agrarianism and the attending devaluation of hunting. . . . Women's traditional roles as procreator, parent, domestic leader, and even artisan have, to some extent, remained intact. . . . Women often became the custodians of traditional cultural values, engaging in reproductive labor and motherwork. In contrast, men suffer from an inability to fulfill traditional roles. (p. 332)

Just as literature has found that men's unemployment in the formal economy can translate into violence and drug use when men lose status, people we spoke with, including this woman in her 40s, made



analogous connections between the disappearance of fish, declining self-concepts, alcohol and drug use, and violence in the Karuk community:

Just seeing my brothers and what they've gone through from being able to go down every summer to the falls to fish, and now not being able to do something like that. I mean they're finding other things to occupy their time, and you know, it's not always constructive!

They would fish and that was their role and they distributed that fish to people, and that was their capital, networks. When that's not there, where's your value? What's your role as a human? What's your role and function? It's no different from somebody who had a good-paying job, was respected and well-known in the office and then they get laid off. There's that loss like, well, what do I do now?

Anger is also a response men described to the changing circumstances and inability to perform appropriate activities as this father of four describes:

You know when I get pissed off, you know what I do? I go out and start drinking. But what if I had salmon? If I had a fucking, if I had a sweat lodge in the back of my house . . . or if I had a fishery that we had enough fish I could go give my mother and my kids the way we need to live . . . that's what we're looking for.

Critically, despite important similarities between formal job loss for non-Native men and the circumstances of Karuk men we interviewed, individual experiences of shame, anger, stigma, or loss emerge not only in relation to self and their inability to provide for a nuclear family but also in relation to their sense of responsibility to care for a larger community, to the fish, and to the *Iksaréeyav* or Spirit People, and, as we discuss next, to fight against racism and colonialism (Innes and Anderson 2015).

### *Ecological Decline as Racial and Colonial Violence: "Doing Masculinity," Anticolonial Resistance, and Engagement with Collective Continuance*

People in the community are keenly aware that men are unable to catch fish as a result of "unwanted outside" interference that has ordered the natural world around the goals, values, and economic

activities of non-Native society. One father put it this way:

You basically see this assault or this attack on your family, either directly as humans, but also the extension of your family relationship and the tribal perspective of seeing that with salmon, you see this attack. There is this constant, I guess the only word I can think of is assault, on them. And there are certain things you can do within your capacity, and then some things are so broad outside of the influence, that it's hard to comprehend what's going on.

Through declining river conditions individuals come to understand their position in a racialized and colonial system of power relations. This power is internalized and experienced via disruptions to individual gender identities and to the community gender structure at large. One of the coauthor's cousins, a father in his 40s, spoke of men being "stripped" of "his" ability to perform traditional masculinity:

The man has to go to the store now to get the groceries instead of going out and getting them in the woods cause you have all these regulations and stuff from the fish and game. It's against the law, you know, and in that sense, a Karuk man if he was a traditional male, he'd be feeling like he was stripped of his tradition, you know, stripped of his way of life because he is no longer allowed to go out and get more than two fish to provide for his family.

The inability of Karuk fishermen to carry out these gendered social practices is understood as a manifestation of both racism and structural genocide. One man who works in the tribal fisheries program emphasized how

I guess, one of the biggest issues is it's a dying art, you know. I mean from being a fish people a couple of generations ago, now our fishery's at risk. Our fishing identity is at risk. There are maybe a handful of fishermen left, so therefore a handful of families that are associated with that fishery . . .

These experiences of a degraded river are associated with a long-felt awareness of Karuk culture and life under attack, as well as a long-standing sense of their imminent destruction. Many people

shared stories such as the following told by one of coauthor Ron Reed's cousins:

Karuk people actually believe that if salmon quit running, the world will quit spinning, maybe the human race as we know it may be nonexistent . . . if the river quits flowing, it's over . . . if salmon quit running, it's like the sign of the end . . .

The fear and dread expressed in these accounts form a foreboding backdrop, as changing environmental conditions become the forefront of structural genocide. We describe this situation as "colonial ecological violence."<sup>11</sup> Intentional resource destruction has long been a tool of genocide and forced assimilation in North American colonization. Today ecological destruction remains the leading edge of forced assimilation, structural genocide, and colonialism for Native people who have managed to retain relationships with ancestral landscapes and species. Degradation of the natural environment continues the transfer of power and resources from Native to non-Native people. Colonial ecological violence is racialized in that it targets people of particular racial categories and operates through disruptions of identities that are central to individual self-esteem, collective meaning systems, and cosmologies. Colonial ecological violence is also gendered, disrupting the process of gender identity within indigenous communities.

Colonial ecological violence generates wealth and poverty; at the same time it inflicts symbolic violence on individuals through shame and powerlessness when people internalize structures of racism and colonialism. As a result, Karuk men's individual struggles to understand themselves as men are interwoven with an understanding of ongoing colonial ecological violence in the river basin. Fishing is about masculinity, but in the context of present environmental decline and community resistance to genocide. At its most basic level, continued engagement in traditional activities asserts that "we are still here" in the face of a hegemonic social discourse of extermination (Smith 2012).

To account for Karuk masculinities, we must continue to extend those definitions that emphasize masculinity as hierarchy. For Schrock and Schwalbe (2009), "All manhood acts as we define them are aimed at claiming privilege, eliciting deference, and resisting exploitation" (p. 281). Yet in this case, the "manhood acts" performed by Karuk men serve ecological functions, unite families and communities, and perpetuate culture in the face of

genocide. Although we do not claim that Karuk gender relations are free from hierarchy, exclusive definitions of masculinity in relation to power and domination at worst appear to privilege colonial masculinities and at best leave no room for indigenous conceptions of masculinity in the form of carrying out responsibilities to the natural world or to community.

### *Restructuring Masculine Identity as Activism and Fishery Management*

I think my little ones are always going to be connected to the fish cause that's what I'm going to teach them, but you know you got to have fish to teach them how to fish. . . you know, the numbers dropping like they do . . . it'd be hard, you know to tell your son how to dip when there's nothing in there to dip . . . (Traditional fisherman and father in his 30s)

Forced alterations to gender practices from environmental decline are a form of violence evident in the damage wrought on individuals and the community. As is not uncommon for members of other racial groups experiencing regular violence, nearly all the men we spoke with have struggled with the use of alcohol, drugs, or violence at some point in their lives. These men made direct reference to how ecological violence altering gender was a source of their struggles, as voiced by this man in his 30s:

Sometimes, when there's low economy and there's no other jobs to do, it's just tough—you drink it away because, well . . . what the hell, there's nothing that you can really do that's going to be good anyways. So you pass the day by numbing the senses. You know when things aren't good with the fish, people take it out because they're stressed, right? Normally, that salmon would be that role of building that capital when you don't have that capital; it's not a reservoir of monetary or even, kind of like, "I owe you one" type of thing to draw from.

In the face of change, individuals continue to work to create meaningful identities and find ways to express their gender constructions and cultural values. As Sherman (2009) found with the decline of the timber industry in rural California, men sometimes restructure ideal forms of masculinity to make them attainable. Sherman described how unemployed men in Golden Valley restructure masculinity through an emphasis on fatherhood and engagement in

activities of hunting and fishing. Karuk masculinities are not static either; men continue to remake their identities in the face of decline.

Although alcoholism, violence, and drugs are responses to the absence of salmon, many Karuk men also engage in activism aimed at removing dams and work with the tribal fisheries program.<sup>12</sup> Through both fishery work and activism, men describe transferring traditional cultural responsibilities to fish, community, and collective continuance into new settings. These directions seemed particularly important for younger men, who described a more immediate either-or dichotomy between drinking and work on the fisheries crew. A man in his early 20s told us,

I've been doing this [working on a fish crew] for about seven months now, and six of them were volunteers, and that for me personally was awesome. . . . I see a lot of my peers running around and they don't know what to do, and I've been there before and running around drinking alcohol. . . . I think it's very important for people my age and even younger to get involved with this. I mean it's good, and you feel like you're a part of something. It's a strong connection.

When asked how they coped with the present environmental situation, these young men spoke of their work on fish crews:

My job, for one, you know I'm out here in this job. If I can be a part of maybe restoring the Klamath, then that would make me feel good. You know, if I keep that positive feeling going, then that helps me kind of black out the negative part of the world, you know. I think that if everybody can do their part . . . bringing the salmon back and restoring the health of our river, if everybody reaches out and does their own little part . . .

Men were proud of their work. They described how it gave them a feeling of caring for place, culture and ecology, as this young man voices:

I feel like we're making a difference, you know, the numbers will start to come up, they have already, you know. They're already coming in the tributaries that we blocked off and made pools for them. Now they're up there and they're spawning in there . . . that's the proof right there.

Note how the expression of traditional Karuk values of reciprocity and responsibility appears among the important dimensions of experience voiced by men in these passages. Although work on the fish crews is a powerful daily expression of acting on behalf of the fish and Karuk community, only a handful of men have options for employment in the tribe. And although habitat restoration does make an enormous difference, the struggle to restore salmon is increasingly critical in the face of climate change.

Another dimension of emerging "traditional" masculinity is engagement in political action. The Karuk Tribe is part of a national effort to remove four dams on the Klamath River. People we interviewed had participated in events from rallies to direct action protests. One man in his early 20s who has been involved in direct action describes the importance of these activities in terms of his responsibilities to family:

The thing that keeps me going is that saying we don't inherit this land from our Elders and our ancestors. We borrow it from our children. I try to keep that in mind. I just got to do my part. I'm just another animal who's going to be here for this little tiny span, and hopefully I can—smash some stuff up and maybe be smashed up in the process. And hopefully afford my family some of the things I was afforded as a child.

Another man in his 50s explicitly translated the notion of traditional responsibilities to fish and community to a responsibility to speak out against the ongoing colonial ecological violence:

Before, it wasn't easy. Ceremonies, subsistence, those, you know, those aren't easy things to accomplish. There's a great deal of responsibility and pride involved in those activities, but we never had to go speak for the fish, we never had to go talk about our values, our cultural ways, our traditional values. As long as we followed them, we were taking care of them. But now the fisherman's role is also to speak for the fish. Speaking publicly isn't a common trait of the Karuk people. The people who speak on behalf of the fish or resources are people that have taken that responsibility and have been able to speak for the resource in a way that is foreign to us . . .

I decided to start speaking on behalf of the fish. On behalf of the fishermen. On behalf of the basket weavers, on behalf of the people who walk before us, and on behalf of the people who walk after us. That's the fisherman today. It's a

burden, it's a responsibility, it's what I cherish, and I wouldn't do anything else. I mean, this is, God put me, the Creator put me on this earth for a reason. I think I'm fulfilling that reason. That's what it is to me being a fisherman today.

Working to repair ecological damage is, for many Karuk men, a way to repair their traditional gender identities and to resist the dual forces of white supremacy and colonial domination. Although responsibility and reciprocity across species and community are still expressed, the masculinities that have emerged in the context of environmental decline are also different. The material absence of salmon cannot be replaced through symbolic reconstructions. Activism and work restoring fish habitat cannot replace prior forms of masculinity both because nature plays an increasingly symbolic role and because the many social interactions associated with harvesting and distributing fish do not occur. Furthermore, this masculinity is tinged with worry and ultimately relies on a possibility of a future return of the salmon.

## CONCLUSION

The theory of racial formation has become the central explanation for race, racism, and racial outcomes in the discipline of sociology (Golash-Boza 2016; Saperstein, Penner, and Light 2013). Yet within this generative framework, there is a surprising absence of attention to the importance of the natural environment as a material and symbolic resource for the process of racial formation and colonialism. We have presented a case that the natural environment affects how traditional Karuk fishermen construct gender, organize social practices, internalize identities and power structures, and resist racism and structural genocide. The fight these men carry out to retain traditional masculinities is part of a larger collective resistance to racism and colonialism in the form of forced assimilation. Just as Curington (2016) argued for an intersectional approach to multiracial formation, we hope that our case study will enable a more intersectional approach to racial formation theory in which each of the intersecting vectors of race, gender, the natural environment, and colonialism are not only visible but understood to be indispensable. Only by bringing an intersectional analysis to our theorizing, and including the natural world, can we understand the construction of traditional Native masculinity, or the ongoing operation of gendered and racialized colonial ecological violence in Native communities.

We believe that ecological decline makes interconnections between the natural and the social increasingly visible for non-Native racial and gender constructions as well. Park and Pellow (2004) wrote, "Racial formation in the United States has always been characterized by an underlying link between ecological and racial domination" (p. 408). The intensification of environmental degradation in recent decades makes attention to the relationship between racial dominance and environmental degradation more important than ever. The complex interplay between "natural" and "social" is evident through the presence of toxins in human bodies, crises in economic systems, and the deep emotional responses people experience to changing physical ecosystems. Environmental decline in the form of species loss, toxic contamination, energy shortages, and now climate change is reshaping the baseline conditions around which human social, economic, political, and cultural systems are organized. In the face of rapid environmental degradation, the importance of the natural world to racialized and gendered dynamics of power and inequality has become both more visible and more important to understand (see Vinyeta, Whyte, and Lynn 2016).

More engaged theorizing of the natural world is not the only suggestion from our data. Native perspectives have much to offer sociologists of race and ethnicity (see Anderson 2010; Anderson et al. 2012; Goeman and Denetdale 2009; Jaimes and Halsey 1997). Robertson (2016) wrote that "centering Indigenous research in mainstream sociology is difficult at best" (p. 248), and yet "indigenous research is vital for challenging deeply embedded colonial assumptions and practices that have long constituted Native Peoples as objects of research rather than as authorities on their own lived experiences" (p. 248). Native feminists assert that colonialism and decolonization are gendered processes, yet attention to how colonialism organizes gendered identities and as well as the structure of gender performances by Native and non-Native people has barely begun (see Fenelon 2015; Glenn 2015). Voices from the Klamath point to the multiple ways that notions of tradition and responsibility may operate to sustain communities and resist colonial encroachment. In closing, we agree with Steinman (2016) that

increased awareness of settler colonialism which can be used to interpret a wide variety of racial phenomena through a historically specific, yet analytically structured and novel perspective may provide new energy to attempts to grapple with these questions, and enable a

greater facility for doing so among scholars and activists alike. (p. 233)

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## NOTES

1. Historically, more than 600,000 adult salmon returned to the Klamath each year (Hewes 1973). Dams were partially responsible for the extirpation of at least seven spring Chinook salmon populations. Numbers of adult fall and spring Chinook salmon returning to the Klamath River have been highly variable in the past 30 years. The late 1980s witnessed multiple years with more than 15,000 adult fall Chinook and up to 5,000 spring Chinook. In recent years, figures have been less than 10,000 for the fall run and near 500 for the spring run (California Department of Fish and Wildlife 2014).
2. The 2005 Karuk Health and Fish Consumption Survey showed that more than 80 percent of households were unable to gather adequate amounts of salmon, eel, steelhead, and sturgeon. Note that although fish are central to Karuk diet and culture, not all Karuk men have responsibilities as fisherman. Men from nonfishing families have other family and community responsibilities, including hunting and holding specific ceremonies and dances, which are also affected by ecological decline.
3. Use of the term *tradition* runs the risk of essentializing and reifying Karuk culture as universal or static. Emphasis on traditional practices must be understood in the context of forced assimilation and colonialism—150 years of overt state pressures for people to relinquish Karuk culture—pressures that are ongoing today. Not only was precontact culture diverse, but the people with whom we spoke come from families with diverse histories of assimilation.
4. Whyte (2013) described environmental degradation threatening the “collective continuance” of tribal peoples: “Collective continuance is a community’s capacity to be adaptive in ways sufficient for the livelihoods of its members to flourish into the future” (p. 518).

5. The term *colonial ecological violence* is from Bacon and is developed further in Bacon (in preparation).
6. Many features of gender systems could be likely be categorized as “gender complementarity” (Worthen 2015). And although men do the fishing itself, fishing season is a busy time for women, who carry out labor that supports these forms of masculinity, including cooking, canning and smoking fish, and driving their husbands, brothers, and sons to and from the falls.
7. We emphasize fish because of the material importance of salmon (accounting for a large portion of the traditional diet) and its symbolic significance in ceremonies, but hunting is another important way many men achieve masculinity, especially those who are not from fishing families.
8. The Karuk Tribe has several recent reports articulating the relationship between traditional management, traditional knowledge and knowledge sovereignty (<https://karuktribeclimatechangeprojects.wordpress.com>).
9. Many people use the term *Creator*, which references a deity that is singular and often presumed to be male. The use of this term, although widespread, is understood as an artifact of the influence of Christianity. The Karuk word *Ikxaréeyav*, or Spirit People, refers to entities that are plural and rarely gender specified (but appear to be possibly male or female in certain circumstances).
10. Activities traditionally performed by women, such as tending, gathering, and preparing forest foods like acorns or tending and harvesting basketry materials, certainly are affected (see Norgaard 2007) and have generated political activism as well, including the formation of the California Indian Basketweavers Association, in part because of pesticide spraying of gathering sites.
11. This phrase was coined by J. M. Bacon.
12. Community involvement in the dam relicensing and now potential dam removal has spanned more than 10 years, with remarkable twists. Agreements have been reached among the tribes, environmental groups, farmers, the power company, and the states of Oregon and California.

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**Ron Reed** is a traditional Karuk dipnet fisherman, spiritual leader, and the cultural biologist for the Karuk Tribe.

Ron comes from a long and prominent family of traditional spiritual leaders and cultural practitioners and is the father of six children. In his capacity as the Karuk Tribe's cultural biologist, Ron has been an important tribal spokesperson who has communicated the cultural and health impacts of current river and forest mismanagement to audiences around the world, and he works at home to restore Karuk culture and society through reconnecting people, especially tribal youth, to the natural world. Mr. Reed is a member of the Forest Research Advisory Committee of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, has served as a member of the Environmental Justice Task Force of the California Environmental Protection Agency, and in 2007 was a California delegate to the first U.S. Social Forum in Atlanta. His words have been featured in prominent news outlets around the world including National Geographic, National Public Radio, and High Country News.

**J. M. Bacon** is a PhD candidate in environmental studies and sociology at the University of Oregon.