



“Light is the normal course of events, darkness is only a temporary interruption”: Lessons from Lucy Thompson

by Elizabeth McClure

Abstract:

Che-Na-Wah Weitch-Ah-Wah Lucy Thompson (1856–1932), a Yurok medicine woman, was born in Pecwan on the Klamath River in California. She is one of the first Native American women authors known for her book *To the American Indian: Reminiscences of a Yurok Woman* (1916). Written in Wiyot territory, in what is now Myrtle town, just outside the city limits of the City of Eureka. Her purpose was to preserve her people’s stories, and to tell the truth about the historical genocidal targeting Indigenous Californians. She also expressed concern for the continued stewardship of Klamath River. Lucy used her skills as a storyteller and writer to counter the false histories created by settler histories, to reclaim narratives, and portray resiliency through difficult times.

There lies a house between the waterfront of Humboldt Bay and old Arcata Road, across the marshes of Highway 101 in what is known today as Myrtle town. This house and land once was the home to a very strong and powerful Yurok medicine woman who battled against the darkness she was born into to bring light back into the world. Today the homes and lands are owned by a very affluent local corporate entity and land owner of several properties across Humboldt County. I will refer to him as Z for his benefit and consideration. My husband and I lived within one of Z’s properties, one of the most familiar and intimate Z had among any property he held power over. The Myrtle Avenue home was acquired by Z’s grandparents in the 1930s. Z’s father and himself were raised within that home that we later lived in for 3 years. Despite months of research, I have not been able to pinpoint how the land was acquired. Our time in this home however reaffirmed for me a notion that the consequences of genocide permutate worlds and are still very real.

Before we had moved into the Myrtle Avenue home, not a single soul had entered it for nearly a decade prior. Later on I found out who the previous owners were from the late 19th to early 20th century. Milton and Lucy Thompson had lived within the Myrtle Avenue home when Lucy wrote her book *To the American Indian*, published in 1916. In the book, Lucy expresses that her intention in writing was to shed light and share parts of her people’s cultural and traditional ways of being in hopes that the white settler population would grow to understand and see Indian people as human. Much of the mistreatment of local tribes began with settler invasion in the late

1840s. Lucy is remembered today for her resiliency and bravery to tell the stories of the area’s Native peoples beyond the stereotypes and bigotries of her time. I however, hold an intuition that she may have fallen victim to the racism and violent oppression that still presses our communities today. In this paper, I will discuss settler colonialism and genocide through the lens of Lucy Thompson’s stories. Notable is Lucy’s teaching on how darkness is only a temporary interruption, for it is critical and vital to draw attention to the strength and resiliency of local tribal nations to persevere, as well as their efforts to balance and heal not just their communities, but the region and all its communities.

Lucy Thompson’s story and life holds significant historical and cultural connections for Yurok people, and offers an in-depth understanding of Humboldt’s non-Indian communities as well. Lucy’s *To the American Indian: Reminiscences of a Yurok Woman* was the first book published by a member of the Yurok Tribe, making Lucy Thompson the first California Native American woman published author. *To the American Indian* is an autobiographical view of the intricacies of life within the Yurok Tribe at the dawn of the twentieth century, revealing her powerful assessment and concern regarding colonization. Following Euro-American invasion, the Yurok people lost over seventy percent of their, a decline precipitated by the federal government decimating Yurok land rights during and following the Gold Rush (Kroeber 1925; Cooke 1956). The Yurok Reservation lies along the lower Klamath River, extending one mile on each side of the river beginning from the Pacific Ocean to forty five miles upriver

to the confluence with the Trinity River. The Klamath River and its salmon are vital for identity and culture, ceremonies, subsistence, and to maintain the connection to relatives and ancestors, a message embedded by Lucy within her stories.

Che-na-wah Watch-ah-wah Lucy Thompson was born in 1853, a pivotal point in which “the prevailing attitude among whites that all Indians should be exterminated was greatly enforced” while state and federal policies supported that “prevailing attitude” (Madley 2016:247). California legislators approved militia campaigns by providing reimbursement to militia volunteer rangers, while Congress also voted to pay for militia expeditions that ranged between 1850 to 1853. Prior to Lucy’s birth, treaties made between 1851-1852 facilitated by agents such as Redick Mckee would have greatly reduced or forced tribes to relocate and abandon their ancestral homelands to move to an “Indian Reservation” in hopes of assimilation; however, the treaties were never ratified by Congress. This resulted in reservations having to be established by executive order, or acts of Congress much later. Within 130 years, California Natives were abducted from their lands, and nearly eighty percent of California Native people died, many from unprovoked massacres and diseases (Madley 2016). In 1851 when Peter Burnett, California’s first governor, announced the “war of extermination will continue to be waged between the two races until the Indian race becomes extinct” (Madley 2016:201).

The same year Lucy was born, Fort Humboldt was established in 1853 within traditional Wiyot territory (California Department of Parks and Recreation

2020). Lieutenant Colonel Buchanan established the fort to “protect” settlers and miners from the Indigenous threats within the region. In reality, Fort Humboldt was used as a shipping port for timber and gold, whereby militarization intertwined with gruesome violence. Lucy speaks to the genocide of the Wiyot during this time, who she refers to as the Humboldt or Eel River tribes. She emphasized how the white settlers would forcibly move any Wiyot who resisted the taking of their lands only to relocate them to Smith River, with a second relocation to the Klamath River, and a third relocation being to the Hupa Reservation on the Trinity River. Lucy describes the resettlement as bloody and violently enforced.

By the year 1855, the settler genocidal rampage reached upriver on the Klamath River, inflicting more violence on the Yurok, Karuk, and Hupa and resulting in what is known as the Red Cap War. Eurocentric narratives describe the events as conflicts and tensions between white miners and local Natives, but the truth was that it was extreme settler violence against the tribes. Euro-American violence and dehumanization of tribes stand in contrast with historical narratives describing events as an “uprising” of Indians with Indians as aggressors. However, prior to the Red Cap War, the State legislature passed the 1854 law that prohibited any sale of firearms and ammunition to Indians. Following in 1855, white settlers invaded Orleans Bar, and held mass meetings to deliberate on how they would enforce the new law to neutralize the threat they perceived from the local “treacherous tribe” (Madley 2016:266). The Red Cap War was resistance to the violence inflicted upon Karuk, Yurok, and Hupa.

When Lucy had published her book in 1916, California’s economy was booming due to growth in oil, mining, agriculture, and shipping, but with huge environmental consequences. The miners had settled upon the Klamath and Trinity Rivers, where they caused major disruption to the rivers and salmon. Settlers diverted water for their own mining exploitation and used mercury to separate the metal. When mercury is used within the water, it can form with other bacteria and become even more toxic, poisoning the ecosystem. The mercury eventually ended up within fish, and people were left with severe medical symptoms, sometimes ending with death. All of the disruptive activity polluted and interfered with the natural flow of the water, eventually taking its toll on the salmon runs so important for Yurok subsistence (Huntsinger and McCaffrey 1995). When the miners took what they came for, they left the camps with destruction of land and waters, and severe damage to plants and wildlife.

Lucy documents within her book the impacts to Yurok life and the dissolution of village communities. Regarding this, Buckley writes “Thompson can be mistaken neither for a Native everywoman, nor for a passive victim of oppression. She used her own considerable cultural expertise, intelligence, adaptability and toughness to interpret creatively and participate in a world newly dominated by white invaders...She is an extraordinary witness both to the ever deeper past and to what some have called the end of the world” (Buckley 1993:481). She admonishes the Euro-American invaders for damage they have caused to local ecosystems, and contrasts Euro-American attitudes toward natural resources with

Yurok practices that effectively maintained the region’s ecological and social stability. Lucy also often wrote within a language of Christian allegory to pacify a white audience, but still stressed the importance of carrying on and keeping alive her people’s oral stories and histories. As California Indian Scholar Cutcha Risling Baldy writes, “the oral tradition undeniably ties Indigenous peoples to their land through knowledge utilized as an important demonstration of living Indigenous epistemologies, while also helping decolonization, not as a metaphor but as a guiding principle built into the histories, presents and cultures” (Risling Baldy 2015:5).

In research however, I came across a document written by A.L. Kroeber titled *Yurok Indian Devil*, which referenced Lucy Thompson as an Indian Devil, a local term for someone who practices malevolent witchcraft. This reminded me of the attack on Maliseet stories told by Andrea Nicholas in *The Assault on Aboriginal Oral Traditions: Past and Present*, in that “This perversion...places it directly in the other, generally Christian sources, which have characterized the Wabanaki Great Spirit...as the Devil, and the Wabanaki shaman or person endowed with spiritual powers as ‘witch’” (Nicholas 2008:14). Calling her a ‘witch’ are “settler moves to innocence” (Tuck and Yang 2012) which the settler colonial agenda depends on along with “the continued erasure and silencing of Indigenous epistemologies and knowledges to prevent challenges to settler colonial claims to land and history” (Risling Baldy 2015:4). Lucy however drew many parallels between cultures, perhaps to seem more human to the white settlers. Dr. Risling Baldy describes how, “Indigenous peo-

ples are consistently asked to draw parallels between their culture and western ideas about the world in order to legitimize and utilize this knowledge within a western paradigm” (Risling Baldy 2015:5).

Five years before Lucy’s *To the American Indian* was published, an Indigenous man was discovered by the corral of a slaughterhouse near Oroville, CA. Upon the discovery of the man later named “Ishi,” workers called the Oroville Sheriff stating there was a “wild man” on the premises; however, when the Sheriff and his deputies came the man did not resist and allowed himself to be handcuffed and led away. Ishi was considered a foreigner within his own land, and became a living artifact within a museum. Theodora Kroeber, the famed Anthropologist A.L. Kroeber’s wife later wrote about Kroeber’s relationship with the “last of the Yahi” in the book, *Ishi in Two Worlds*. Such descriptions of Ishi reveal shifting Euro-American narratives towards Indigenous peoples. While a change, these descriptions are still abusive. Anglo settlers who wanted land would describe Natives as being fierce and frightening, and descriptions of Indigenous homelands as the “wilderness” further dehumanized Natives as “savage” people who waste land. Renaming Indigenous peoples as “heathens,” sought to justify murder and plunder. Lucy spoke to this within her chapter “Wild Indian,” where she attempts to cope with this rhetoric. When she describes Yurok villages as being hospitable and cultivated places inhabited by civilized people, using in depth descriptions of their strict laws and moral codes, she is utilizing the anomaly of the “Wild Indian” to reinforce differences between civilized and

uncivilized behaviour, while reinforcing the Yurok village system as an exemplar of civilization.

While Euro-Americans perceived the land as a resource to use, Indigenous peoples had a caring relationship expressed within natural sustainable growth cycles and crucial social, material, and spiritual balance in relation to the land. Behind the Myrtle home is a barn and behind it is what is known by maps as an "ancient Indian trail" that connects the home to the marshes along what is now known as Highway 101. Also behind the barn, we came across old relics from what we speculated to be from the late 19th century. Z had just covered and hid away items that likely belonged to Lucy, and likely shared great meaning between Lucy and her mother. Within her book, Thompson emphasizes how invasive the whites are. Not only have the Euro-Americans committed genocide and stolen Yurok land, but they also threaten collective memories built by the Yurok community. This is shown within her chapter of *Ancient Houses* with the descriptive story of Lucy's mother visiting an old Yurok house that she had inherited, one that was considered to be a sacred place. It had been unsuitable to live in, but her mother enters the house with a specific purpose in mind: "For the past twenty years she has been breaking and pounding to pieces the stone bowls, trays, and all the ancient implants. She is endeavoring to destroy all these sacred reminiscences of the prehistoric days that they may never be ruthlessly handled and curiously gazed upon by the present white race" (Thompson 1991:184).

In *To the American Indian*, Lucy calls for the Yurok people to return to Indig-

enous cultural values in order to heal themselves from the losses experienced through colonialism. We must consider the history of religious suppression within Indian Country before referencing reintroduction of Yurok ceremonies to fully understand the revival processes that tribes and tribal families have confronted over the last 150 years. Native religions were suppressed as a part of federal Indian policy, and federal laws led to the break up of familial relations and customs along with religious, cultural, and governing sovereigns. One of the most impactful was the Dawes Act, whereby Native people were only allowed four years to select an allotment or Indian Agent Ambrose Hill would select one for them on the reservation. This largely broke up the village system. The Yurok were given a trust patent where the United States would hold the allotted lands in trust for twenty-five years for an individual or heirs, and after the expiration of the trust period, the Indian would receive the land in fee simple (Prucha 2000:170-173). With rising logging exploitation by white settlers after the era of mining, Congress had passed the Act of 1892 which detailed the allotment of the Klamath River Reservation. Remainder unallotted lands were in title under public domains and were vulnerable to be sold or settled upon, legislated by the Homestead Laws and the 1878 Timber and Stone Act.

"Light is the normal course of events; darkness is only a temporary interruption..." in the great dances of renewal that Lucy describes as bringing people together, and "the regalia, dancing, singing and feasting makes one feel the love of the great Creator of all things" (Thompson 1991:151). Lucy

Thompson calls for the Yurok people to return to Indigenous cultural values in order to heal themselves from the losses they experienced through colonialism. The undermining of tribal sovereignty is still a reality for tribal nations though. In 1988 for instance, the Yurok along with the Karuk and Tolowa went to the Supreme Court to protect their sacred high country from destruction by the Forest Service. The Supreme Court decision was in favor of the U.S. Forest Service running a road through holy ‘high country’ in the Siskiyou Mountains. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor in 1988 wrote that “Even if we assume (the road) will virtually destroy the Indians’ ability to practice their religion...the Constitution simply does not provide a principle that could justify upholding (the Indians’) legal claims” (Nabokov 1999:408). The dissenting Justice William J. Brennan stated that this reduced the Indians’ religious freedom to “nothing more than the right to believe that their religion will be destroyed” (Nabokov 1999:408). But as Lucy states that “light is the normal course of events,” cultural revitalization happened and is ongoing despite these events. Just a few years prior, the Yurok held their ceremonial sacred Jump Dance for the first time since 1939 for the rebalancing of the earth, and the high country was later protected through an act of Congress.

The Klamath River also holds a history of pain and ecological destruction brought by the Gold Rush and later logging. The river communities also still face the grave impacts of dams that are causing havoc upon the rivers and its tributaries. The dams affect the water quality, streamflow, wildlife, and even ceremonies. Salmon species are also fac-

ing extinction. After the first dam was built on the Klamath River in 1918, the spring Chinook salmon lost hundreds of miles of spawning habitat and the runs declined drastically. Public blame has often been put on the tribes instead however for using their traditional gill nets to fish.

The resiliency of Yurok people through genocide, assimilation, and discrimination is seen within Lucy’s testimonies and it is as relevant today as in 1916. Lucy’s concerns for the Yurok worldview is shown through her warnings from a century ago that the Euro-American way of life is unsustainable. *To the American Indian* continues to be of social and cultural relevance. Lucy was a skilled orator and she was a woman that exemplifies the conviction of survival. Lucy refused to be victimized or to turn a blind eye to the victimization of others, as she wrote “One influential Humboldt Indian [Wiyot] and his family was kept safely at Pecwan village by Weitch-ah-wah (my own father), and after everything was quiet on Humboldt Bay, Weitch-ah-wah brought him and his family back to their home, where he lived peaceably for many years, having died only a few years previous to this writing. Today there are not more than twenty or less Indians living, and what is left has completely lost all their old and ancient customs and teachings. Sometimes it seems hard to think of man’s inhumanity, but as sure as the sun goes down, the white man will suffer for his wicked treatment of the Humboldt Indians” (Thompson 1991:220).

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About the Author

Elizabeth McClure is a recent alumni of Humboldt State University as a student of Native American Studies with the emphasis on tribal governance and leadership. She grew up in Clayton County Georgia, where she was raised by her father and grandparents (Eastern Band of Cherokee). Elizabeth was taken in by her Hanai family from Waipi’o Valley, Big Island where she also had met her husband Alex. They had worked together in sustainable food systems, such as Kalo farming, and were privileged to learn Hawaiian cultures and customs from her husband and the community. Elizabeth and her husband have been living in Eureka, California for the past seven years where they have been taken in by another Hanai family and share a strong passion in learning and being supportive towards the Indigenous communities of Humboldt County. She is currently a student in the M.L.S. Indigenous Peoples Law program with Oklahoma University College of Law, and is hopeful to apply for law school soon.

Elizabeth was inspired to dedicate this paper towards Lucy Thompson, being that Lucy had inspired her to dig deeper into the true history of the Pacific Northwest and had played an integral part in learning more about the tribal nations and the people of Humboldt County; especially in the terms of respect. Elizabeth is passionate about interweaving the historical implications of law and policy that has an impact on tribal nations and peoples, sustainable traditional food systems, and historical contexts on the impacts of land and water.