

# ONE

## Between the Lines

If you cannot see  
*istilleat*  
between the lines  
*allofmyeals*  
then your collected facts  
*witha*  
will never constitute  
*musselsbell*  
knowledge.

—Shaunna Oteka McCovey,  
Yurok/Karuk, 2005<sup>1</sup>

You can come to a place time and time again, year in and year out—as I’ve been coming to my getaway in Humboldt County on California’s northwest coast for some thirty-five years—and not see for so long what a serendipitous experience suddenly makes obvious and impossible to ignore. My relationship with Big Lagoon first changed as a result of a personal tragedy. But it was my belated recognition of a social tragedy embedded in the landscape that triggered a journey that would become this book.

Visiting Big Lagoon has always been a life-affirming experience for me, an opportunity to slow down my citified pace and take

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small pleasures in the everyday. The Yurok refer to the lagoon as Oket'o, or *Where It Is Calm*, a name they give to any large body of enclosed water. Oket'o seems especially appropriate for placid Big Lagoon, only a stone's throw from the volatile Pacific Ocean. I typically escape here to luxuriate in the present. But out of the blue, about three years ago, I found myself propelled into the "cool sepulcher of the past" when I discovered that my bucolic retreat was a short walk away from an unmarked Yurok cemetery that had been plundered early in the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup>



1.1 Oket'o (*Where It Is Calm*), or Big Lagoon

I thought I was familiar with every nook and cranny of Big Lagoon until this new information expanded my sightlines. Bob McConnell, Tribal Historic Preservation Officer for the Yurok, taught me to imagine the thousands of people who lived, worked, and died here long before the region became a mecca for tourists. Gene Brundin, Chairman of the Yurok Tribe's Repatriation Committee, introduced me to Big Lagoon's botanical diversity—its herbs, plants, and roots once regularly used as medicines, teas, and materials for baskets. And archaeologist Janet Eidsness encouraged

me to look at the ground in new ways in order to appreciate how a midden of rocks cracked by heat from fire, oily dark-stained soil, and broken shells reveals stories about everyday native life.

It's an interesting paradox of the creative process, as choreographer Twyla Tharp observes, that you need to exercise rigorous control over a project, "but good planning alone won't make your efforts successful; it's only after you let go of your plans that you can breathe life into your efforts."<sup>3</sup> Unlike my previous work, this is not an investigation that I carefully thought through and planned before starting the research. The topic came to me head-on and demanded my attention. And once I agreed to go off into uncharted territory, I stumbled into fissures that run deep beneath the ground.

Humboldt County is typically described in tourist guides as an "outdoor paradise" and "ecotourist's heaven," with "legendary giant redwoods," "stunning beaches," "rugged cliffs," and "picturesque coastal villages." It's a place "where you can connect with Nature." I am very familiar with this narrative. It's what draws me to Big Lagoon. But beneath this imagery of a pristine landscape is a messy social history of people divided by warfare, antagonisms, and disillusionments. From the perspective of the Yurok and other native peoples in the region, "much of the land has been wounded, broken or lost."<sup>4</sup> As some historians have acknowledged, northern California in the mid-nineteenth century was one of the bloodiest places in the country, deserving of a vocabulary that we usually associate with other countries and other times: pogroms, ethnic cleansing, apartheid, even genocide. What happened in California did not presage Nazi Germany or mimic Boer-ruled South Africa, but there are resemblances and affinities that demand serious consideration.

Thanks to the post-1960s generation of historians, we've made considerable progress in complicating the rosy-hued story of northern California as a place celebrated primarily for economic daring and individual initiative, peopled by "men with empires in their purposes / And new eras in their brains," as Sam Foss put it in 1894. Now we know much more about the brutal underside of the Golden State, and about the micro-histories of people who were typically omitted from the master narrative of evolutionary progress—native communities, Chinese immigrants, women pioneers, Latino miners, and white workers who didn't strike it rich.

And yet it's still so easy to visit Humboldt County and be

oblivious to its troubled history: there are few public memorials or monuments or preserved sites that shock us into remembrance of tragedies not-too-long past or juxtapose the grandeur of the region's scenery with its killing fields. Nobody seems bothered that a well-visited elk refuge in Redwoods State Park is named in honor of one of the country's most notoriously racist ideologues.<sup>5</sup> We seem to have a hardwired capacity to deny and compartmentalize painfully disturbing information. For many years, I could separate my knowledge of Big Lagoon's troubling past from its pleasurable present. In this sense, I was no different from my parents, who refused to visit Germany because of its murderous legacies but didn't think twice about vacationing in what had been Vichy France, happily visiting towns where Jews had been rounded up for transportation to concentration camps.

Death changes the meaning of a place. Until a few years ago, I'd never associated Big Lagoon with the end of life. But since the summer of 2006, when we followed our son's wishes and launched his remains into the lagoon, it's been impossible for me to separate the living from the dead. And about a year later, answering the Yurok Tribal Council's call to protect the cultural legacies of their ancestors who had been uprooted from Big Lagoon, I decided to learn more about this "place of ceremonial renown."<sup>6</sup> As a historian interested in public history and memory, how could I ignore this past literally buried in my own backyard?

What I initially thought would be a personal exploration of mortality and a brief investigation into local events in a small place led to an investigation of big issues that resonate in the history of anthropology and archaeology, and in contemporary debates about patrimony and repatriation: Whose cultural meanings speak for a place? Whose history prevails in the public domain? What can be done to repair the damage and atrocities committed by long-gone generations? To answer these questions, I had to leave the rural quiet of Big Lagoon and travel to museums in London, Berlin, and Washington, D.C., and to a cemetery of slaves in New York; and delve into long-forgotten archives, shuttered cabinets, and basements stacked with human remains. I also had to learn to see between the lines.