



BOOKS & ESSAYS

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# A displaced California tribe reclaims sacred land

*The Mountain Maidu return to their valley, but the work of reclamation never ends.*

**Ana Maria Spagna**

Image credit: Bud Turner/Courtesy Feather River Land Trust

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Folding chairs clattered, and conversations echoed off high ceilings. Several young men, heavyset with braids and ball caps and baggy jeans, held squirming kids while a group of women set up drums in a circle. A potluck table held salad and store-bought sheet cakes, and a crockpot full of venison stew sat atop a counter crowded with small-sized Dixie cups — the kind that hold mouthwash at the dentist or grape juice in some church communion ceremonies — filled with what looked like pudding. We were high in the Northern Sierra, in the shadow of Mount Lassen, and the California sun, even in November, shone yellow through picture windows. Outside, kids clambered on boulders, adults smoked a courteous distance from the door, and dogs lounged in the shade. Ken Holbrook approached, wearing a crisp white shirt, gray jeans and a red tie, the only tie in the room. He greeted me, as he'd greeted everyone, with a firm handshake and a wide boyish grin, and said he had a good story to tell.

The last time I'd seen Ken, he'd been balancing barefoot across a log over Yellow Creek with his two young kids in tow. A healing ceremony for land damaged by logging in Humbug Valley, a 4,500-foot-elevation valley sacred to the Mountain Maidu, had just concluded. Ken tossed an expensive camera over one shoulder, then reconsidered. He placed the camera and his car keys in the duff beneath a ponderosa pine, and set off to lead the way. The log was

weathered gray, the creek shallow, the kids wildly exuberant. They crossed with ease and turned around to return as the sun glowed gauzy on a ridge-top fringe of conifers, the few still standing.

Now, six months later, Ken held a passel of responsibilities. As the new executive director of the Maidu Summit Consortium, one of the last remaining speakers of the Maidu language, and the youngest son of elder, author and activist Beverly Ogle, he was in charge of wrangling this lively crowd. Which by the looks of it would be no easy task.

The news, after all, was still new. After more than a decade of trying, the Mountain Maidu, a small and federally unrecognized tribe, had reclaimed title to Humbug Valley from Pacific Gas & Electric Company. It had been a long saga: A judge in the early aughts, in the wake of the Enron scandal, ordered the utility to relinquish thousands of acres to conservation stewards. But PG&E did not consider the Mountain Maidu potential stewards. Like other outsiders, company representatives dismissed the Maidu as a loose band, a tribe without a central government and — until now — without a land base.

The Maidu were undeterred. They formed a nonprofit consortium, weaseled their way into meetings and recruited allies. They tackled on-the-ground projects — building cedar fences to protect gravesites and designing an interpretive kiosk, all as directed by a PG&E-appointed committee, in order to prove their ability to be good stewards on land they'd already tended for centuries. There were problems: A wildfire gave PG&E an excuse to clear-cut sacred sites and glean a little more profit before getting out. Most recently, they'd suffered the too-early death of Farrell Cunningham, one of their most charismatic leaders. When consortium members and friends and family met in Oakland to await the final decision, no one knew for sure what would happen. Now, less than a week later, with Tasman Koyom, as the Maidu call

Humbug Valley, already under snow, they'd gathered to celebrate in this brand-new community center in Chester, the nearest town. I'd driven 800 miles to join them, but my journey had been even longer.



*Three generations of Maidu, including elder Beverly Ogle, her daughter, Brenda Heard, and granddaughter, Yasmin Holbrook, display the traditional baskets woven with local willows by their ancestor, Ce'este (known as Nellie Thomas).*

*courtesy Maidu Summit Consortium*

A couple of years earlier, I set out to find stories of people reclaiming nature. It's a funny word, reclamation, with a definition ripe with contradiction: to take back, to make right, and to make useful. The connotation is both moral and pragmatic, and sometimes the results are disastrous, but reclaiming seems to be an irrepressible human instinct. While some examples bordered on deception — grass seed pressure-sprayed atop flattened former mountaintops to mitigate mining, for example, or new wetlands created in vacant lots to justify development elsewhere — other stories were inspirational and very nearly triumphant. The best of them seemed to be a kind of *re-reclaiming* — re-taking what had once been taken.



Making right what had gone wrong. Re-defining what useful might mean. The Mountain Maidu's reclamation story — the one we were here to commemorate — was one of the very best.

I couldn't imagine how Ken Holbrook's story could be any better than that. But I was eager to hear it.

He'd recently traveled to Salamanca, Spain, he explained, to give a presentation on Maidu reclamation efforts. He described their plans to use traditional ecological knowledge — practical knowledge passed down over generations — to manage the land as an example not only to other indigenous people, but to land managers everywhere. Would-be reclaimers should seek alliances, he urged, partnerships with other organizations, as the Maidu had. When the deal was finalized, the Maidu Summit Consortium would hold fee title to Humbug Valley, but two partners — Feather River Land Trust and California Department of Fish and Wildlife — would jointly hold a conservation easement. The Land Trust would help determine how much development might be appropriate — campground improvements, for instance — then monitor that development. The California Department of Fish and Wildlife would manage the fishery, the pesky non-native brown trout and the wildlife, including endangered and potentially endangered species like the willow flycatcher and Sierra red fox. Even PG&E would remain a partner, in the financial sense: The company had agreed to provide funding for long-term planning and for two full-time staff positions, including Ken Holbrook's. Still, the Maidu would own the land, and as owners they planned to hold ceremonies there, to use traditional ecological knowledge to tend the vegetation — to plant, nurture, prune and harvest — as their ancestors did, and to share these practices with visitors.

“But here’s the thing,” Ken said, leaning close. “When I spoke in Salamanca, I stood in the exact same place where Queen Isabella commissioned Christopher Columbus to come to the New World.” He paused and grinned.

“The exact same place,” he said.



*Yellow Creek as it winds through the newly reclaimed Humbug Valley, California.*

*Bud Turner/Courtesy Feather River Land Trust*

Reclamation, in the old days, almost always was the story of one great man — Floyd Dominy, say, or Gifford Pinchot, or John Muir — with a sweeping agenda. Even if their accomplishments, in hindsight, seem dubious, they sincerely believed in what they were doing. And there lies the rub. The definition of what constitutes “making right” is shifty. Taking back water that would be wasted running to the sea? Protecting forests from fires? Deeming land “untrammeled,” when it had been tended by indigenous people for centuries? Even Columbus must have had a righteous motive; it’s too cynical to believe it was all greed, and unrealistic to imagine he could’ve known the havoc he’d wreak. On the flipside, much could go wrong for the Mountain Maidu: Partnerships can sour, development can over-reach, and inviting more visitors to Humbug Valley — Farrell Cunningham had envisioned a future “Maidu National Park” — well, that’s a can of worms. Still, still, it’s our human

instinct, and our human responsibility, to try to turn things around. Reclaiming isn't preserving or restoring, but attempting to stand again in the exact same place, to try a new and better way. Or in this case, an old and better way. If there's a hint of Sisyphus to it — when the hell will we get it right? — there's hopefulness, too.

These days, I've found that reclaiming is more often than not a communal effort led largely by women and characterized by stubborn endurance and inclusiveness. For 35 years, 89-year-old Phyllis Clausen of Friends of the White Salmon River worked to bring down the aging and inefficient Condit Dam with help from American Rivers, the Yakama Nation and eventually PacifiCorp, the power company itself. Timbisha Shoshone elder Pauline Esteves, who can remember when the National Park Service first moved into Death Valley, led her tribe to reclaim their homeland with help from as far away as Europe and as close, at times, as the park superintendent's office.

Then there's Beverly Ogle. Her two books brim with adaptable characters who defy stereotypes. Her great-grandfather, a gold-mining Maidu teetotaler, fathered more than 20 children via two wives, including Beverly's great-grandmother, a Pit River Atugewsi woman whom he bought as a child at a slave auction. Beverly's mother played the violin and was shunned at her Indian school for having a white father; she later worked for a time as a Forest Service fire lookout. Beverly's uncles trapped otter, mink, ermine, beavers, bobcats, coyotes and foxes, some into the 1980s. Her extended family includes loggers, miners and power company employees, along with victims of those same companies, and activists, like herself, who fought against them.

Early in our very first conversation, she described forming the Maidu Summit Consortium. There was a time, she said, when different factions within the tribe fought one another.

“We had to be all pulling in the right direction,” she said, sitting in her warm kitchen while rain poured down the windowpanes. “Like the old saying goes: ‘You take two twigs, you can bust them, but you put a bunch together, it’s harder to bust.’ ”

Even after the Maidu were allowed to enter the land discussions with PG&E, most of the focus remained on other places, more developed and developable, around the nearby reservoir, Lake Almanor. The Maidu were interested in these lands, too, of course. They’d like to build a cultural center, a museum or gallery, somewhere near a tourist mecca. But it’s Humbug Valley, with its miraculously undeveloped meadows, a mostly still-healthy forest, and a naturally carbonated spring bubbling up among moss-covered boulders, that means the most. You can tell by the way Beverly drops her voice, the way her tone changes from outrage to excitement.

“In the four years I worked as campground host out in Humbug Valley, we’d have gatherings, bear dances, potlucks. It was great. It was so good for our Maidu people.”

*Our* Maidu people. Never singular; never without the possessive.

**Y**oung would-be reclaimers often want to know how to make a difference. What to say? Love one place. Go to meetings. Make some food. Never turn down an ally. Never give up. Here’s the truth: You alone, you can’t do much. You with a bunch of friends, you can do one hell of a lot. Look around that room in Chester: You’ll see a Bay Area lawyer who worked pro bono for years, forest supervisors and seasonal firefighters, an archaeologist in a wheelchair, a logger with earrings, traditional clapper-stick singers in derby



hats, all of them part of the whole — even the lone writer from a distant state, assiduously taking notes in the back of the room. This, too, I want to say: Allow yourself to be sucked into the fold.



*At a healing ceremony held by the Maidu Summit in Humbug Valley, Beverly Ogle, Mountain Maidu elder and activist, is adorned with wormwood leaves before a sacred bearskin. Both have medicinal and spiritual properties.*

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*Jane Braxton Little*

**W**hen I heard that the Maidu had reclaimed Tasman Koyom, I did not wait for an invitation. I hopped in the car, landed in Red Bluff at nightfall and set up camp by the Sacramento River with two sleeping bags, a wool cap and mittens for reading by headlamp. But I couldn't sleep. I got up and walked in the light of the gibbous moon among live oaks, thinking this might be it, the last trip, the end of my journey. The next morning I visited Beverly Ogle at home, brought her a bag of apples I'd picked with my mother in late fall. She sat beside her woodstove with her children and grandchildren coming and going, and she beamed. Like Martin Luther King Jr., she said, she had a dream.

“Only difference is, I lived to see it come true,” she said.

Now, at the community hall, the mood was like a sports team award banquet or a Fourth of July picnic, the gravitas understated, almost nonexistent. I filled a bowl with venison stew and picked up one of the Dixie cups and sat near the back of the room beside an elderberry flute maker, whom I’d met at the healing ceremony, and his family. While I waited for the stew to cool, I tasted the contents of the Dixie cup. It turned out to be acorn paste, a traditional Maidu staple that tastes exactly as you’d imagine: thick, earthy, nutty, slightly bland, filling, but not precisely satisfying. I choked it down with water. Considering the work that went into making it, wasting it seemed out of the question. Besides, it felt like communion. I looked around the room at the oddball assembly. I’d long since stopped trying to figure out who was Maidu and who was not. I remembered what Farrell Cunningham had said when we’d last gathered in Humbug Valley: We’re all Maidu today.



*Ce'este with her husband, Syntonum (Fred Thomas),  
and another of his wives, Betsy, and their children.*

*Courtesy Maidu Summit Consortium*

When the formalities began, the first speakers were members of the Maidu Summit Consortium, people who endured years of negotiations and interminable meetings to get to this point. Their eyes sparkled as they described what this victory meant.

“This is what I dreamed of as a child,” Ken Holbrook began. He recalled camping in the valley, fishing in the creek, drinking from the carbonated springs, and I pictured him crossing Yellow Creek with his own kids.

Lorena Gorbet, another stalwart, unassuming leader, stood in a loose sleeveless summer dress at her place in the drum circle. “I never thought I’d see this day,” she said.

One woman, impeccably dressed, with the poise of a no-nonsense substitute teacher or perhaps a U.S. senator, was the only speaker to show any hint of anger. She stood, trembling, and approached the microphone.

“I never thought I’d live to see Indians given *anything* by the dominant culture,” she said.

The applause was long.



*Ce'este, also known as Nellie Thomas, with a child on her back and baskets in the Humbug Valley c. 1896.*

*Courtesy Maidu Summit Consortium*

When at last Beverly Ogle rose, she described the moment she heard the news.

“I had this great urge to return to Humbug Valley, to tell our relatives, the forest, the birds, the animals, the grass, that they belong to us, and the healing can begin.”

*Our relatives.* This connection with what’s nonhuman, non-sentient even, adds a new twist to the whole concept of community, one that’s at the heart of books like Robin Wall Kimmerer’s *Braiding Sweetgrass* and M. Kat Anderson’s *Tending the Wild*. Anderson argues for nurturing a “kincentric” relationship with nature, where plants and animals are seen as brothers and sisters.

(Wallace Stegner said essentially the same thing 50 years ago, when he argued for the need to preserve wild places so humans remember that we are “brother to the animals, part of the natural world, and competent to belong to it.”)

When I talked with Kat Anderson, she reminded me repeatedly, insistently,

that the ideas were never hers. The cumulative wisdom belongs to generations of Native people gathering on the land in a twofold sense: coming together, hanging out, and gathering what they need. It might seem like a modest vision, but it’s one with staying power. And when it materializes, like today, it feels huge.

At the end of the speeches, Brenda Heard-Duncan, Beverly Ogle’s daughter, made a surprise announcement. It was a surprise to Beverly, at least; her kids had told me the day before. Beverly was receiving a special lifetime achievement award from the Indigenous Communities of Northern California. With it came a handcrafted bow. Brenda, who presented the bow, announced proudly that Beverly Ogle was the first woman ever to receive this award. But, Brenda explained, there were no arrows to go with it. The ceremonial arrows will come later, next spring, when the snow melts and the Maidu return to Humbug Valley.

As tables were cleared, I moved around the room saying goodbye. I stopped to see Beverly last. She sat with the bow in her lap, gazing out at the room from a table strewn with empty acorn paste cups and half-eaten slices of cake. I waited my turn behind other well-wishers, then sat beside her to congratulate and thank her: for her friendship, her inspiration, for welcoming me into the fold.

“Now the real work begins,” she said. “And you’ll be back.” It was not a question.

I walked out into fading winter sun with my notes and an empty Tupperware container and drove until dark, from fire-scarred forest to wide dry basin, past small lakes — natural or dammed, it was impossible to tell — and small towns with boarded-up storefronts and tidy clapboard houses with porch lights on. I’d thought this trip would be the end, but now I knew the truth: The work of reclaiming never ends.



*Mountain Maidu baskets, woven by Ce'este in the traditional way using willows gathered from the Humbug Valley.*

*Courtesy Maidu Summit Consortium*

*Ana Maria Spagna is the author of two essay collections, a memoir/history, and most recently, the handy guidebook, 100 Skills You'll Need for the End of the World (As We Know It) and Reclaimers, new from University of Washington*



*Press, from which this essay is adapted. She lives in Stehekin, Washington, with her wife, Laurie Thompson.*

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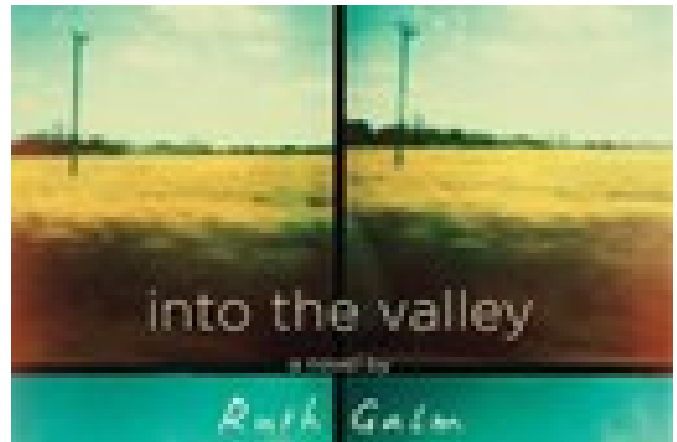
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