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## The Production of Unequal Access



## 2

### **A Continuing Legacy: Institutional Racism, Hunger, and Nutritional Justice on the Klamath**

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Karuk people have relied directly on the land and rivers of the Klamath Mountains for food since “time immemorial.” So vast was the abundance of salmon, sturgeon, steelhead, lamprey, and forest food resources that the Karuk were among the wealthiest people in the region that would become known as California. These foods flourished in conjunction with sophisticated Karuk land management practices, including the regulation of the fisheries and the management of the forest through fire (Salter 2003; McEvoy 1986). Ceremonial practices including the First Salmon Ceremony regulated the timing of fishing to allow for escape-ment and thus continued prosperous runs. Forests were burned to stimulate production of food species, especially acorns and bulbs. Burning also influenced the local hydraulic cycles, increasing seasonal runoff into creeks. The diversity of available food resources provided a safety net should one species fail to produce a significant harvest in a given year. Thus while salmon were centrally important, other food resources were consumed fresh and preserved to provide throughout the seasons.

With the invasion of their lands by European Americans in the 1850s, the life circumstances of Karuk people changed considerably. Today Karuks are among the hungriest and poorest people in the state. Median income for Karuk families is \$13,000, and 90 percent of tribal members live below the poverty line. Genocide and forced assimilation over the past century have damaged traditional knowledge and relationships with the land and led to changes in the people’s tastes and desires. Yet despite dramatic events that took place during the Gold Rush, the testimony of elders about foods they ate until recently indicates that considerable changes have also occurred within the last generation, suggesting that contemporary circumstances, as well as historical ones, produce Karuk hunger. Even tribal members in their early thirties recount significant changes in the number of fish in their diet since childhood. Four dams

on the Klamath River figure centrally in this fact. Since 1962, these dams have blocked access to 90 percent of the Spring Chinook salmon spawning habitat. When the Spring Chinook population plummeted in the 1970s, Karuk people attained the dubious honor of experiencing one of the most recent and dramatic diet shifts of any Native tribe in the United States.

Spring Chinook have been the single most important food source to decline, but there are at least twenty-five species of plants, animals, and fungi that form part of the traditional Karuk diet to which Karuk people are currently denied or have only limited access. Without salmon and tan oak acorns, Karuk people are currently denied access to foods that represented upward of 50 percent of their traditional diet (see figure 2.1). With the destruction of the once abundant riverine food sources, a significant percentage of tribal members rely on commodity or store-bought foods in lieu of salmon and other traditional foods. Food insecurity within the Karuk Tribe is evidenced by the fact that a survey conducted by the tribe in 2005 found that 42 percent of respondents living in the Klamath River area received some kind of food assistance.<sup>1</sup> One in five



**Figure 2.1**  
Grinding acorns

respondents use food from food assistance programs on a daily basis. The percentage of families living in poverty in Karuk ancestral territory is nearly three times that of the United States as a whole. This dramatic reversal in food access is the direct result of the systematic, state-sponsored disruptions of long-standing traditional Karuk relationships with the land. Indeed poverty, hunger, and a wide range of cultural struggles experienced throughout Indian Country<sup>2</sup> today are the result of similar histories.

In this chapter we describe the processes through which Karuk people became hungry. This story is important on its own terms. And understanding why and how this group of people who had survived for tens of thousands of years off the land became hungry is also important for any understanding of food or environmental justice. We begin with a review of current literature on racism and environmental justice. We then use the ongoing struggle of the Karuk Tribe of California to maintain access to their traditional foods to illustrate how the production of hunger has been the result of a series of a “racial projects” through which traditional Karuk management practices have been damaged, wealth has been transferred to non-Indian hands, and the environment has been degraded. While a “materialist” basis for food and wealth in the natural world is acknowledged by Native scholars, the importance of land for the accumulation of wealth, and its absence for the production of hunger, has remained outside social scientific conceptions of institutionalized racism, environmental justice, racial formation, or food studies. We therefore aim to situate the production of Karuk hunger within a more integrated theory of environmental history, racism, and racial formation. Here we describe three racial projects significant for the production of hunger in today’s Karuk community. These projects are outright genocide, lack of recognition of land occupancy and title, and forced assimilation. We indicate throughout how each of these state actions has disrupted Karuk cultural management practices, and in so doing produced hunger alongside ecological damage. Lest readers fall into the myth that the production of hunger took place in the past, we emphasize that lack of recognition of land title and forced assimilation are very much ongoing today. Current actions by the state of California and multiple bodies in the federal government, such as the failure to recognize Karuk fishing rights, Karuk land tenure, and Karuk traditional management practices, as well as the regulation of water resources by the Bureau of Reclamation and California Northwest Regional Water Quality Water Board, and the licensing of dams by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, can

and should be understood as current racial projects that are very much behind the production of today's hunger. Forced assimilation happens as the aforementioned actions of the state deny Karuk people access to the land and food resources needed to sustain culture and livelihood. Forced assimilation happens even more overtly when, for example, game wardens arrest Karuk Tribe members for fishing according to tribal custom rather than state regulation.

### **Institutional Racism, Racial Formation, and Racial Projects**

Our proposition that hunger in the Karuk community today is a product of denied access to traditional foods rests on the lens of a racialized environmental history. Early theories of racial inequality, including the work of W. E. B. DuBois ([1903] 2007), Manning Marable (1983), and Walter Rodney (1974), explicitly include the importance of land as a source of wealth (and its absence as a source of poverty). Yet contemporary race scholarship has generally failed to incorporate the environment or environmental history in racial analyses. In tightening these connections we build on Omi and Winant's important work on racial projects, racial formation, and institutional racism (1994). Omi and Winant assert that racism and the racial categories of today can only be understood through attention to historical process they call *racial formation*. Racial formation occurs as the codification of economic and political conflict produces racial categories. Similarly, institutional racism indicates that racial disadvantage is built into the social structure. Howard Winant defines institutional racism as "the routinized outcome of practices that create or reproduce hierarchical social structure based on essentialized racial categories" (2004, 126). Yet despite the emphasis on history, attention to the importance of land as a source of wealth is surprisingly absent within scholarship on institutional racism. Instead, in contemporary theory, institutional racism has been understood as a function of disproportionate access to social resources such as educational opportunity or other forms of social, economic, and cultural capital (e.g., Stretesky and Hogan 1998), leaving aside the role of access to environmental resources in the reproduction of poverty and wealth. There are important exceptions. For example, in their study of racial formation in Silicon Valley, Park and Pellow apply the framework of racial formation to show how institutional racism is a "complex set of practices supported by the linked exploitation of people and natural resources" (2004, 403). They argue that "racial formation in the United

States has always been characterized by an underlying link between ecological and racial domination” (408), and emphasize that attention to ecological degradation enhances our understanding of race and racism in important ways: “If we follow racial formation theory and we agree that racism has shaped the very geography of American life across a number of sociohistorical periods, then we must admit that we cannot fully understand that social geography without also acknowledging that the exploitation of people of color and of natural resources have gone hand in hand” (421). In so doing, their work is a crucial and powerful piece connecting environmental and race theories.

### Environmental Justice

The present situation in which Karuk people face hunger resulting from denied access to their traditional food fits within the framework of what is known as “environmental justice.” For the past several decades it has been recognized that poor people and people of color are most likely to pay the price of various forms of environmental degradation ranging from toxic exposure in communities from landfill sites to workplace exposure (e.g., Bullard 1993). Within environmental justice scholarship, early work emphasized the need for the wider understanding of environmentalism that attention to race engendered. But as Park and Pellow also note, much of the environmental justice field has developed around the inclusion of race as a variable, focusing on descriptions of the unequal experience of people of color, but failing to incorporate powerful race theories such as racial formation or institutional racism with existing environmental theory.

Even in cases where institutional racism is employed (e.g., Bullard 1993), most discussions have focused on historical dynamics of housing segregation and the enforcement of health and safety violations. These instances reflect disparate access to social resources such as legal council and political representation, but stop short of taking into account a larger view of institutional racism in the production of wealth and poverty through disruption of relationships with land, or the importance of maintaining relationships with land as a means of carrying out culture. These latter features of institutional racism are central to understanding the impoverishment and genocide of Native people. Similarly, most discussion of environmental racism faced by Native Americans has focused on the very significant issues of mining and exposure through waste trading, landfills, and waste incinerators (Gedicks 1994). These

circumstances are more similar to the conditions faced by African Americans fighting toxic exposure in urban settings, which led to the emergence of an environmental justice framing. Institutional racism with respect to Native people in the literature is most often discussed as the absence of economic infrastructure, unemployment, and inadequate education and health care, all forms of institutional racism that parallel the political circumstances and history of other urban-based racial minorities. Yet Native environmental justice calls us to move beyond the urban and spatial frames that have been so important to the field of environmental justice. Thus, we aim to show how institutionalized racism manifests not only as a disproportionate burden of exposure to environmental hazards, but also in denied access to decision making and control over resources. We aim to illustrate how the production of hunger has been simultaneous with the degradation of culture and the land. We draw upon and develop a lens of racialized environmental history to see what disrupted the Karuk people's ability to consume subsistence food.

### **The Production of Food Insecurity: A Racialized Environmental History**

The diets of all peoples and cultures change over time. This fact can be seen as “natural.” For the Karuk people, however, diet has shifted dramatically in the course of recent generations through what can only be understood as very “unnatural” conditions. While extensive cultural disruption from contact for many California tribes occurred up to five hundred years ago with the establishment of the Mission system, tribes in the northern and more remote part of the state experienced little contact with settlers until the Gold Rush (Norton 1979). As a result, these tribes have retained much more of their culture, population base, and traditional food use. The Karuk Tribe of California is today the second largest tribe in the state and is host to a large percentage of the total basket weavers, native language speakers, and cultural practitioners to be found statewide. Despite their relative intactness when compared to other American Indian tribes in California, the impacts of past activities from the Gold Rush to resource extraction and genocide on the lives, culture, and lifeways of Karuk people are enormous (Raphael and House 2007; Norton 1979). We next review the three racial projects carried out by the state that are significant for the production of hunger in today's Karuk community: outright genocide, lack of recognition of land occupancy and title, and forced assimilation. Each of these actions damaged



the ecosystem and disrupted Karuk cultural management, and in so doing denied Karuk people access to food. Each set of actions was part of the process of racial formation: in each circumstance, the state's economic, political, and military actions were legitimated via the judicial system and justified by racialized rhetoric.

### Genocide and Relocation

If environmental racism is the unequal burden of ecological hazards imposed on people of color and their surroundings, then the European conquest was the continental embodiment of this process.

—Park and Pellow 2004, 410

Although there was some prior interchange between Karuk and non-Indian people, violent dislocation began with the entry of miners to the Klamath region the Gold Rush of 1850 and 1851. During this period of explicit genocide, the outright killing of about two thirds of Karuk people, relocation of villages, and attempts to move people onto reservations all interfered with everyday food management and gathering activities (Lowry 1999; Norton 1979; Raphael and House 2007). Western scientists and social scientists alike follow in the tradition of claiming that prior to European contact our continent was an untouched wilderness. Yet in fact Native people actively managed salmon, acorns, and hundreds of other food and cultural use species. The abundance of these species was a product of this management in which high-quality seeds were selected, the production of bulbs enhanced through harvest, oak populations reinforced through fire, and fish populations carefully managed. Most non-Indians can identify ecological degradation in the form of severe manipulations of the rivers from hydraulic placer mining, or manipulations of the forest from the imposition of new fire regimes. What seems quite beyond comprehension, especially for non-Indians, is the ecological damage occurring from the disruption of Native cultural management. If the disruption to food management still seems insignificant in the face of genocide and relocation, recall that access to food is key to both immediate and long-term survival, which is why controlling access to food resources has long been such a favorite military strategy. Consider, as well, that while authors in this volume write of inequalities in the “production” and “consumption” of “food,” Karuk people speak of the foods they eat as relations. They speak of a long-standing and sacred responsibility to tend to their relations in the forest and in the

rivers through ceremonies, prayers, songs, formulas, and specific practices they call “management.” Rather than doing something *to* the land, ecological systems prosper because humans and nature work together. Working together is part of a pact across species, a pact in which both sides have a sacred responsibility to fulfill. Traditional foods and what the Karuk call “cultural use species” flourish as a result of human activities, and in return, they offer themselves to be consumed.

It seems impossible for non-Indians to fully grasp the meaning or importance of this complete contrast to the non-Indian perspectives of “food production” and “food consumption.” Instead, the significance of American Indian relationships with the natural world are at best lost in overglamorized and essentialized characterizations of Noble Savages,<sup>3</sup> and at worst, entirely invisible. To comprehend and acknowledge Native relationships with food would require non-Indians to recognize not only the depth of the human scale of Native American genocide, but also the fact that this genocide has been an assault on a spiritual order that nourished and governed an entire field of ecological relationships.

The disruption of Karuk cultural food management was carried out by the first three governors of California, each of whom created state-sponsored programs promoting the killing of Indians (Hurtado 1988). Statements by these men illustrate both the racist ideologies of the time and the role of the state of California in the racial project of genocide. For example, in a message to the state legislature on January 7, 1851, Governor Burnett said that “a war of extermination will continue to be waged between the races until the Indian race becomes extinct” (Ibid., 135). Racial ideologies are evident as justifications for state violence in an 1852 letter by California Governor John Bigler, asking for assistance from the federal government in protecting white settlers in northern California from Indians: “The acts of these Savages are sometimes signalized by a ferocity worthy of the cannibals of the South Sea. They seem to cherish an instinctive hatred towards the white race, and this is a principle of their nature which neither time nor vicissitude can impair. This principle of hatred is hereditary . . . Whites and Indians cannot live in close proximity in peace” (Heizer 1974, 189).

Largely due to state-sponsored Indian extermination, the Karuk population went from about 2,700 people pre-contact to about 800 people some time between 1880 and 1910 (McEvoy 1986). Note that just as Omi and Winant describe, the racial project of Karuk genocide was achieved through both ideological justifications and legal mandates. White notions of Indians allowed settlers to enter the region and extract

whatever resources they desired, while the Marshal Doctrine explicitly legitimated the perspective that Indian lands were available for the exploitation of whites without need for compensation. Despite the racism of the time, there were attempts from some corners to address the violence. Even in these critical voices, however, it was concluded, as in this editorial, that, “the fate of the Indian is fixed. He must be annihilated by the advance of the white man. . . . But the work should not have been commenced at so early a day by the deadly rifle” (Heizer 1974, 36).

In 1851 the U.S. government negotiated a treaty with the Karuk Tribe (Hurtado 1988). However, white landowners found the treaties unappealing as they gave Indians land, flour, pack animals, dairy cattle, and beef cattle, which would likely mean Native people would work their own ranches instead of providing cheap labor. “Treaties that conflicted with agriculture and mining interests had little hope of finding support in California’s state government” which “did everything possible to thwart them” (Ibid., 139–140). On July 8, 1852, due to pressure from the governor of California, Congress refused to ratify this and other California treaties of that time. As a result, eighteen California tribes, including the Karuk Tribe, which agreed to treaty terms in good faith, were left without any of the protections, land, or rights they reserved in their treaties (Hurtado 1988).

Meanwhile, in 1851 and 1852, the state of California spent \$1 million per year to exterminate Native people (Chatterjee 1998). Beginning in 1856, the governor issued a bounty of \$0.25 per Indian scalp, increasing it to \$5.00 per Indian scalp in 1860, and reimbursed bounty hunters for the cost of ammunition and other supplies. Then, in 1864 the Hoopa Valley Indian Reservation was established and all Karuk people were ordered to leave their ancestral lands along the mid-Klamath and lower Salmon rivers and relocate to the reservation. Many people did so. Others fled to the high country or escaped and returned. Yet due to this overt displacement and absence of a collective land base, many Karuk people continue to live on the Hoopa reservation, in cities on the coast, and spread across California and Oregon. This dispersal of people had significance for their access to food, the types of food they ate (and eat today), and their ability to participate in cultural activities to tend their food resources.

Both the human and environmental impacts of the Gold Rush and early settlement are impossible to grasp. As Karuk people were killed and forced to relocate, Karuk practices of tending the land to ensure food productivity were replaced by technologies such as hydraulic placer

mining, which were enormously environmentally destructive. Forests and hillsides were washed away as highly pressurized water flushed an estimated twelve billion tons of mud and soil into California rivers statewide (Merchant 1998). These actions have obvious and lasting impacts on traditional Karuk riverine foods such as salmon, steelhead, sturgeon, and lamprey.

### Lack of Recognition of Land Occupancy and Title

The period of overt genocide has now ended and a significant number of Karuk people have returned to their ancestral territory and continue to carry out traditional management. Upon their return however, they encounter another racial project that underlies today's hunger, the failure of the state to recognize their land occupancy and title. Access to land is central for the management and harvesting of food. Karuk people recognize over a million acres of biologically diverse mountains and rivers as their ancestral territory. Today Karuk-owned lands consist of only 793 acres, just 0.0007 percent of ancestral territory (Quinn 2007). Instead, 98 percent of the lands that were once occupied and managed by the Karuk are now officially under the management of the U.S. Forest Service (Ibid.).

The divergent, racialized European and Karuk conceptions of land, appropriate land use, and land "ownership" underlie and in turn become a vehicle for the lack of recognition of Karuk land title. "Prior to the infusion of Europeans into the Upper Klamath River in 1850, ownership of land by individuals was not recognized. But the tribes, and individual people did own rights to hunt, fish, gather and manage particular portions of the surrounding landscape" (Quinn 2007). As a result of these different conceptions of land "ownership," Karuks on the whole lost lands under racialized federal acts, while on an individual level some members within the Karuk Tribe later sold parcels into non-Indian hands for low prices.

By the time Karuk people were legally allowed to leave the Hoopa reservation and return to their ancestral territory, the U.S. Forest Service had already claimed it. But the state of California's refusal to recognize Karuk land title began with the aforementioned failure of the U.S. Congress to ratify the 1851 treaty. Then in 1887, the passage of the Dawes Act or General Allotment Act provided that small parcels of land were allotted to Karuk families, and simultaneously gave the federal government power to evict Indians from their land. An equally important aspect

of the law enabled whites to cheaply acquire “surplus” lands that had not been allotted to Indians (Deloria 1970). The Dawes Act is widely recognized for its attempt to establish the European system of private ownership on Indian lands. Here, non-Indian conceptions of land ownership are codified into laws which together with racialized rhetoric and ideology become the vehicle for the transfer of land from Indian into white hands. The Dawes Act was designed to break up tribal land and divide it among individuals: “It was hoped that initiating Indians to the concept of private land ownership would aid in integrating them into white society” (Delaney 1981, 2). Because the Karuk people did not have a reservation, and were then living on lands claimed by the U.S. Forest Service, the 1910 amendment of the Dawes Act to include forest lands was particularly significant (Delaney 1981). Through this racial project, resources were diverted from Indian to non-Indian hands and land management practices shifted from activities geared toward food production to those that would achieve profits under capitalism (timber and farming).

Then in the 1950s, with the widening of State Highway 96, the Bureau of Indian Affairs transferred land to the state of California. In the process many Indian parcels were decreased further in size to accommodate the modern two-lane highway and mandatory right of way. By 2007, thirty-five of the original ninety parcels remained in the ownership of Karuk families. Today, because very little land within Karuk ancestral territory is in private ownership, land that does come onto the market is too expensive for most Indian families or even for the Karuk Tribe to purchase.

The state’s failure to recognize the legitimacy of the Karuk aboriginal occupancy and land title is an enormous feature underlying present day hunger. Land management practices from burning to the collection of mushrooms are officially the jurisdiction of the U.S. Forest Service. Similarly, hunting and gathering regulations are set by the state of California according to “white man’s” rather than tribal law. Furthermore, regulations regarding deer, elk, and other food species are written with recreational hunting in mind, not subsistence. Because the Karuk do not have a reservation, they hunt on federal forest lands, but these lands are not managed and regulated with the goal of providing subsistence foods. According to Jesse Goodwin, in Karuk tradition, “the only time that we consider not hunting the deer is . . . during mating season and early spring when they are dropping their babies. . . . We give them a chance to grow up, but any time in between there was fair game for getting out food.” Within Karuk culture, hunting is part of management and respects the needs of the herds to ensure they are healthy, but is flexible enough

to allow for taking deer at various times of year when it is needed. Management, however, also included making sure there was sufficient habitat for deer to flourish, in part through burning, rather than simply focusing on limiting how many deer could be killed.

In contrast, state fish and game regulations focus only on how many deer can be killed and when. In order for a Karuk Tribe member to get deer legally, he or she first must buy tags and a license, requiring proof of meeting California's hunter education requirements, all of which takes time and costs money. As set by the California Department of Fish and Game, in 2008 hunting licenses for state residents over the age of sixteen cost \$38.85, and the first deer tag cost \$26.00 and the second cost \$32.30 (California Department of Fish and Game Hunting Digest 2008, 8). There is no option to obtain a third tag. Yet the hunting season for the zones in Karuk ancestral territory lasts just over a month. And it is nearly impossible to make two deer last an entire year—especially when shared with extended family, including elders who can no longer hunt, and when the venison is being served at ceremonies. Karuk tribal member and cultural practitioner David Arwood notes, “Our way of life has been taken away from us. We can no longer gather the food that we [once] gathered. We have pretty much lost the ability to gather those foods and to manage the land the way our ancestors managed the land.” If a Karuk person hunts “out of season” or gets a deer without purchasing a tag from the state it is considered poaching. Getting caught for poaching has a variety of consequences depending on the circumstances and if it is a repeated offense. Karuk tribal member Jesse Goodwin explains that “usually, they just take our gun rights away from us, try to see if there’s any way of us never being able to do it again, and then after that they send you to jail.” Mushroom regulations too are a source of tension. David Arwood relates how “there were two tribal members right up here and they had them sprawled on the ground with a gun on the back of their head because they didn’t cut their mushrooms in half.”

The lack of recognition of land title is coupled with a lack of recognition of fishing rights. During the 1970s the federal government stepped up enforcement and forcibly denied Karuk people the right to continue their traditional fishing practices (Norton 1979) by arresting them and even incarcerating them. Karuk fishing rights have yet to be acknowledged by the U.S. government, though now tribal members may fish at one “ceremonial fishery.” As tribal member Jesse Coon explains: “We can fish at the falls. Dipnet and that, you know, that’s the only place we can fish really. But we’re not able to go out and go hunting anymore,



**Figure 2.2**  
Ron Reed dipnet fishing on the Klamath River

without getting in trouble for it or something, you know, so—now we have to go to the store to buy our food, and get different kind of foods that aren't sustainable for our bodies, like food that was made here for our people, you know? So a lot of it has changed that way, you know" (see figure 2.2).

Access to food and notions of how land should be used may be contested, but the state holds the ability to assert its version. Traditional Karuk Fisherman Mike Polmateer describes his experience fishing at his family's long-established site:

I fish at my family's hole up here at Dillon Creek every single day during the winter, and I'm checked for my license no less than six times per year, by the same game warden, by the same two game wardens over and over and over, trying to catch me keeping fish. They sit up here on a point with binoculars watching me catch fish, and they watch me return them to the water. Because I'm—I'm afraid. . . . There's consequences to be suffered. . . . If you send your child out in to the world right now not knowing there's consequences to be suffered, they're going to end up like many many natives, not only in this country but in other countries, in the penal system. What I'm seeing now is this penal system is—they're raising our young kids now. They're going in at 18, 19, 20 years old, not coming out until they're 27, 28, 30 years old.

Land is also important in providing a home, which in turn facilitates the return of tribal members who have dispersed outside the ancestral

territory. Land and having a home create the proximity needed for day-to-day social communication through which language can be used and culture carried out. Without recognized land title many Karuk people are dispersed, making it more difficult to maintain ceremonies, continue language use, maintain and strengthen cultural identity, or carry out other vital cultural practices. While some tribal members do travel to participate in ceremonies on the ancestral territory, many aspects of cultural practice, especially those related to food, cannot be continued in these distant locations. In addition to the cultural impacts from dispersing people, the absence of recognized land title makes for poverty, as Karuk people cannot use the land for subsistence or other income, and must instead pay rent to inhabit lands “owned” by others. Viewed in light of this information, present-day hunger is clearly a result of the state’s failure to recognize land title. While events such as the failure to sign the treaty and the transfer of lands to the U.S. Forest Service happened over a century ago, the continuing consequences of such events are played out every day through the ongoing legal and criminal enforcement of racialized notions of how the land should be used and for whom. We argue that only by considering this *racialized environmental history* can one understand the hunger of and racism faced by Karuk people today. The management of Karuk cultural resources by non-Indian agencies, and the fact that Karuk cultural management is mostly illegal, is also part of the next racial project we describe underlying today’s hunger: that of forced assimilation.

### Forced Assimilation

Explicit forced assimilation of Native people into the dominant culture occurred through boarding schools and other institutional processes. Like youth from tribes throughout Canada and the United States, Karuk children were separated from families at young ages and taken to Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding schools in Oregon and California for the specific purpose of assimilation. Boarding schools for Indian children ages six to eighteen were mandated from the end of the 1880s up through the mid 1900s. They were prevented from speaking their native language and practicing their native customs and forced to eat a diet of “Western” foods. The result was that Karuk children were separated from families, communities, culture, and traditional foods, often for many years. They were unable to learn fishing, gathering, management practices, and cultural ceremonies. “One thing I do know that changed with a lot of the



salmon too was all of the kids got shipped off the river to the boarding schools,” said Carrie Davis, Karuk tribal member. “My father took initiative and he learned the fishing part of his culture. His best friend didn’t really catch the fishing part as much as he knows language and a lot of the ceremonial stuff. My dad never danced in a ceremony. Four years ago was the first time he’d ever danced, because he was beat for even trying to be Indian.” Karuk people still struggle today to recover economically, socially, politically, and mentally from the devastation of these policies.

Forced assimilation is ongoing today, although its vehicles may be less overt than in boarding schools. Instead as we discussed in the previous section, forced assimilation occurs because a significant proportion of Karuk cultural food management and production practices are illegal. Forced assimilation also happens when Karuk food sources are so depleted that tribal people must eat government commodity foods instead (see figure 2.3). While there is no policy *designed* to change how Karuk people view and use the land parallel to the ways that boarding schools explicitly enforced “white” behaviors onto Indian people, forced



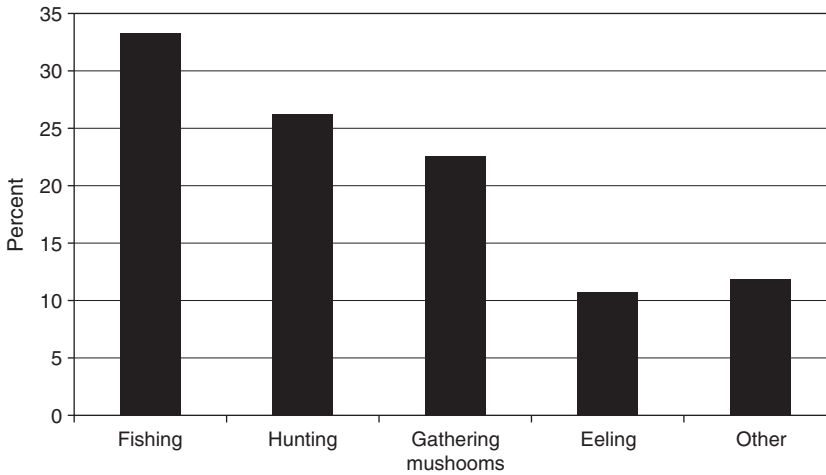
Figure 2.3  
Commodity canned foods

assimilation takes place at a variety of levels from explicit use of force, threat, and fear of force, to a range of reasons that keep Karuk people from participating in cultural practices. Again, the production of hunger as a present-day example of environmental justice is intimately interwoven with racialized *environmental* history. The assimilation in question is assimilation to non-Indian understandings, values, and uses of the natural world. We therefore expand upon the significance of these disruptions of Karuk management for hunger here in our discussion of forced assimilation.

Whereas long-standing cultural traditions existed for regulating and sharing fish and other resources both within the Karuk Tribe and between neighboring tribes, the entry of non-Indian groups into the region led to conflict and dramatic resource depletion (McEvoy 1986). As noted earlier, cultural management practices used to enhance food resources from burning to fishing have been made illegal by federal, state, and other agencies. For example, Europeans did not understand the role of fire in the forest ecosystem. Since the Gold Rush period, Karuk people have been forcibly prevented from setting fires needed to manage the forest, prolong spring runoff, and create proper growing conditions for acorns and other foods (Margolin 1993; Anderson 2005). For many years following white settlement in their territory Karuk people were simply shot for engaging in cultural practices such as setting fires. Non-Indian fishing regulations, such as those developed and enforced through California Department of Fish and Game, have often failed to take into account the Karuk as original inhabitants, their inalienable right to subsistence harvesting, and the sustainable nature of Karuk harvests. As a result they have attempted to balance the subsistence needs of Karuk people with recreational desires of non-Indians from outside the area. Karuk tribal member Vera Davis notes the imbalance and injustice of this view:

Now I don't think that no one has a right to tell us when we can do it when you have people who pay hundreds of dollars to come in, kill the venison and get the horns. I don't think that is fair because this is our livelihood. . . . We had supplies from the river the year round. We hadn't been told that we couldn't get our fish any time of the year. That was put there for us by the Creator, and when we were hungry we went to the river and got our fish. Vera Davis. (qtd. in Salter 2003, 32)

Even more dramatic is the outright refusal of recognition of the Karuk fishery. In the 2005 Karuk Health and Fish Consumption Survey individuals were asked whether members of their household had been



**Figure 2.4**  
Percentage of tribal members who report harassment or questioning while gathering food by these methods. *Source:* Norgaard 2005

questioned or harassed by game wardens while fishing for a number of aquatic food species. As indicated in figure 2.4, 32 percent reported that they had experienced harassment while fishing.

To be fined or have a family member imprisoned imposes a significant economic burden on families. This is a risk that many are unwilling or unable to take. Of those reporting harassment, 36 percent reported that they had decreased their subsistence or ceremonial activities as a result of such contacts.

State regulations affect not only fishing and burning, but also hunting, mushroom gathering, and gathering of basketry materials. Tribal Vice-Chairman and Ceremonial Leader Leaf Hillman describes this situation: “The act of harvesting a deer or elk to be consumed by those in attendance at a tribal ceremony was once considered an honorable, almost heroic act. Great admiration, respect and celebration accompanied these acts and those who performed them. Now these acts (if they are to be done at all) must be done in great secrecy, and often in violation of Karuk custom, in order to avoid serious consequences.” Tribal member Mike Polmateer explains the reality of growing up under these circumstances:

When I hunted with my uncles, for the longest time I never knew you hunted during the day. We always went and got our meat at night. And it was always about where’s the game warden, you know, where’s the cops, and you know,

things like that. So that's one of the things that stuck in my mind as a young kid. We were always watching for headlights, you know, always trying to hide from the law, out doing what we were supposed to do, which was provide for our families. We weren't out selling meat. We weren't out selling hides.

In the 2005 Karuk Health and Fish Consumption Survey tribal members were also asked whether members of their household had been questioned or harassed by game wardens while gathering a variety of other cultural and subsistence items. Twelve percent reported such contacts while gathering basketry materials, and over 40 percent indicated harassment while gathering firewood. Twenty percent of survey respondents reported that they had decreased their subsistence or ceremonial activities as a result of such contacts. Denied access to traditional management at the hands of non-Native agencies has significant health, cultural, and spiritual impacts, including denied access to healthy foods (see Jackson 2005; Norgaard 2005). Forced assimilation through the imposition of non-Karuk management and denied access to traditional foods is the dominant racial project through which genocide, ecological degradation, and hunger are perpetuated in the present day. Yet Karuk lifeways continue to be practiced both overtly when tribe members can get away with it and covertly when they cannot. From a Karuk perspective, continuance of these traditional lifeways and practices is essential not only for food, but also for the maintenance of cultural and tribal identity, pride, self-respect, and above all, basic human dignity.

Forced assimilation reaches its most insidious form when the food species that Karuk people would like to fish for are simply not there. We began this chapter noting the importance of salmon as an abundant traditional food. The Klamath River was once the third-largest salmon producing river in the West. Yet as of 2009, the wild salmon populations of the Klamath River have been reduced to roughly 4 percent of their previous productivity. Traditional Karuk fish consumption is estimated at the extraordinary figure of 450 pounds per person per year (Hewes 1973). In contrast, today the Karuk people consume fewer than 5 pounds of salmon per person per year (Norgaard 2005). Now so few fish exist that even ceremonial salmon consumption is limited (see figure 2.5). Commercial canneries set up at the mouth of the Klamath severely impacted salmon runs during the 1920s. Then the building and operation of dams on the Klamath River, beginning in 1916 with Copco I, further decreased fish populations.

The construction of Iron Gate dam in 1962 appears to be significant, as over half of the respondents to the Karuk Health and Fish



**Figure 2.5**  
Ron Reed and Merv George Jr. at Scottish Power Shareholders Meeting in Edinburgh,  
Scotland, June 2004

Consumption Survey report that Spring Chinook became an insignificant source of food for their families during the 1960s and 1970s, although some families continued to gather significant food into the 1980s and 1990s. As coauthor Ron Reed notes, forced assimilation happens when you need something to feed your family:

A healthy riverine system has a profound effect on the people on the river. I have six children. If every one of those kids went down and fished and caught a good healthy limit like it was back in the 80s, you could pretty much fill a freezer and have nice good fish all the way through the year. But now, without a healthy riverine system the economy down here on the lower river is pretty much devastated. All the fishing community is devastated by the unhealthy riverine system. Instead of having healthy food to eat—fish—we are relegated to eating commodity foods that the government gives out. That's our subsidy: high starch foods, things that aren't so healthy that the Karuk people are pretty much forced to eat. (qtd. in Norgaard 2005)

Fisheries scientists identify the five dams on the mainstem Klamath that are now owned by the corporation PacifiCorps as a major obstacle to fisheries health. As this book goes to press there is good news on the horizon. Tribes, environmentalists, commercial fishermen, farmers, and the dam owners have come to a settlement agreement on removal of the dams. If this takes place it will be the largest dam removal effort in the world.

## Conclusion

We hope that this chapter has achieved a number of goals. First, we hope the story it tells helps to squarely situate food access as an issue of environmental justice. Early environmental justice work brought to light the crucial connections of racism and toxic exposure. As scholars continue to theorize the experiences of different racial groups, and activists define the connections between a wider range of social and environmental problems, our conception of environmental justice grows ever richer. Our story about how the Karuk people became hungry also contains important lessons about the long history of environmental injustice, a history that goes back much further than the commonly told history of environmental problems such as exposure to toxins—most of which were developed during World Wars I and II.

Second, while many environmental scholars and movement activists now integrate race as a key dimension of environmental problems, less attention has been paid to the incorporation of important racial theories (e.g., racial formation) with theory on the environment. Even environ-

mental justice literature, while emphasizing the linked domination of the environment and people of color, has neither included the longer view of environmental history through which such relationships are visible, nor adequately theorized racial formation, which would allow for understanding of their significance. We hope that we have made clear the imperative of these links, and among other things demonstrated why racial formation and environmental history must inform our conceptions of food justice.

Third, we hope that race scholars will further integrate the role of environmental degradation as an interacting factor in the production of racism. This understanding that racial formation and environmental exploitation are intertwined has important lessons not only for hunger and food justice studies, but also for sociological understanding of the role of land as a source of wealth (and its absence for the reproduction of poverty and racism). In making a case that theory on institutional racism must incorporate the environment, we hope we have also illustrated why theory on racial formation and environmental history must be integrated more generally.

Finally, we have emphasized here how the destruction of the land becomes a vehicle for racism and hunger, but the reverse is also true. Traditional ecological knowledge and management have made the ecology of the Klamath River what it is today. Thus racism and cultural genocide produce further environmental decline. As they gain political and economic standing, Native American tribes including the Karuk have become increasingly involved in natural resource management. Yet tribes are disadvantaged in these settings due to both a lack of broader social understanding of their unique cultural perspectives, and a lack of acknowledgment of the violent history perpetuated against them—much less the continuing effects of this history. It has been our aim to enhance broader public understanding of both this history, and the importance of Karuk management for ecological health on the Klamath. May the Karuk people, the Klamath River, and all who live there continue to flourish.

## Notes

1. The 2005 Karuk Health and Fish Consumption Survey contained sixty-one questions designed to evaluate the range of economic, health, and cultural impacts for tribal members resulting from the decline in quality of the Klamath River system. Open- and closed-ended questions on the consumption and harvesting of traditional foods were developed in response to interview data. Personal and family history information on medical conditions was included, as

well as information on age of death of family members. The survey was distributed to adult tribal members within the ancestral territory. The survey had a response rate of 38 percent, a total of ninety questionnaires. This is a relatively high response rate for this rural, impoverished community; still, we are unable to know the views of those who did not respond. Given community demographics, we speculate that many of those Karuk Tribe members who did not respond were more traditional, and had less income than those who did respond.

2. The term *Indian Country* is widely used by Native people in the United States to refer to lands that are legally owned and controlled by tribes, as well as metaphorically to refer to the fact that Native people create and occupy cultural spaces within the dominant culture of the United States (e.g., and a major Native newspaper is *Indian Country Today*).

3. The phrase *Noble Savage* comes from a characterization of Native Americans by some European colonists in which Native people were idealized for positive qualities, yet were simultaneously viewed as inferior for being “closer to the earth.” The term idealizes Native people, but is deeply racist. Native American agricultural technologies and social achievements were a source of wonder for the Europeans, but rather than recognize these as the result of sophisticated cultural accomplishments that had been learned over time, Europeans assumed that Native people were primitive and their achievements “natural.” The *Noble Savage* concept emerges in conjunction with Romantic critiques of the harshness of civilization. The first use of this term is widely credited to the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in 1755.

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