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Framing the Forgotten: Portrayals of the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe in Media Narratives

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Ayush Iyengar and Aaron He are high school seniors at Bellarmine College Preparatory in San José, California. Both students are interested in local history and Indigenous justice, and work closely with the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe of the San Francisco Bay Area to support their efforts toward federal recognition. Both created and led the Indigenous Justice Coalition, a youth-led nonprofit that supports unrecognized tribes across the United States. Ayush and Aaron regularly lobbied on behalf of marginalized Indigenous communities before city councils and congressional offices. Aaron and Ayush developed their critical thinking and public speaking skills through competition in state and national level policy debate.

ABSTRACT

Historical media provides a new opportunity to identify and examine colonial methods of marginalization against Indigenous groups in the Bay Area. We analyzed 111 historical documents from 1850-1935 and 1965-2000, ranging from newspapers and cartoons to government documents. The documents were based within various cities in the San Francisco Bay Area, with the goal of compiling a thorough record of the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe's continued existence. We then extrapolated four core themes and multiple subthemes observed from a close reading and categorization of each document, anchoring their concepts in the existing literature base.

Keywords: *The Muwekma Ohlone Tribe, California Native American communities, Settler Colonialism, Discursive Violence, Erasure Narratives, Media Narratives, Logic of Elimination, Federal Recognition, Archival Analysis, Indigenous Resistance, and Historical Newspapers.*

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INTRODUCTION

California Native American communities have long been portrayed in colonial narratives as “vanishing” peoples destined to disappear or even “extinct” by certain scholars. Such tropes of Indigenous disappearance influenced real policies, most notably Superintendent Lafayette Dorrington’s 1927 report that severed 135 landless California tribes from federal recognition rolls (p. 1). The Muwekma Ohlone Tribe of the San Francisco Bay Area (then known as the Verona Band of Alameda County) represents a unique case study. Although their families never vanished from their ancestral lands (Severson et al., 2022), government reports and media often wrote of them as a “short-lived race” (“Death of Tausino Sanchumi,” 1899). In 1925, UC Berkeley anthropologist Alfred Kroeber published his pronouncement that the Costanoan (Ohlone) “are extinct so far as all practical purposes are concerned” (p. 464). Despite retracting his claim in 1954 at the California Indian Claims hearings (Kroeber & Heizer, 1970, p. 10), his earlier declaration had already been used to influence the removal of the “Mission San Jose” Muwekma Ohlone from the list of landless federally recognized tribes in California by Superintendent L. A. Dorrington. This initial misrepresentation set in motion a series of administrative decisions that ultimately led to the tribe’s omission from the Bureau of Indian Affairs’ 1978 list of federally recognized tribes (Leventhal et al., 1994).

Today, the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe continue to fight for reaffirmation of their federal recognition status in order to secure economic development opportunities, repatriation rights, land protections, and eligibility for educational and health benefits (“Federal Recognition – For the Muwekma, a Previously Federally Recognized Tribe: It Is a Birthright Denied,” n.d.). Furthermore, through close-knit kinship networks, modern Muwekma Ohlone families have continuously fought against erasure (Field et al., 1992). While women continued traditional plant cultivation and maintained family households, men frequently worked together at local businesses. In addition, Muwekma ancestors established a cultural resource management firm to protect ancestral remains and participated in historic events like the Alcatraz occupation. The documentation of such resistance contributes to Field et al.’s idea of “consciousness-raising” of the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe (p. 430).

Examining the societal portrayals of Indigenous people that fueled the Muwekma Ohlone’s marginalization and disenfranchisement as a BIA documented previously federally recognized tribe serves both a scholarly and political challenge. By scrutinizing how historical records denied their presence, we can better recognize and challenge the biases that persist today. Accordingly, our study investigates the portrayals of the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe in historical records, asking how a legacy of government neglect and select media depictions contributed to narratives that perpetuated the tribe’s erasure to modern day (Field et al., 1992, p. 427). Our study argues that historical media overwhelmingly reproduced the settler colonial tropes of erasure, dehumanization, and spectacle. While these portrayals were largely harmful, records also contain moments of resistance that push back against dominant narratives set by colonial society.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Extensive literature has noted how settler colonial narratives often rely on discursive violence to erase Indigenous presence. Settler colonialism operates through what Wolfe (2006) termed a “logic of elimination”: a structural drive to remove or replace Indigenous people in order to secure land for settlers (p. 387-409). Importantly, he notes this logic is not limited to physical suppression; it can also manifest in alternate forms, such as assimilation policies, discursive violence, or declarations of Indigenous people to be extinct. Subsequent scholars have extended this idea by examining the representations of Indigenous communities that accompany settler colonization. In 19th-century New England, O’Brien (2010) revealed how local white historians habitually wrote Native Americans out of existence in town histories. She coined the terms *firsting*, settlers inserting themselves as the original inhabitants; *lasting*, writing Indigenous people out of existence as the last of their kind; and *replacing*, positioning settlers as the rightful occupants overwriting Indigenous presence. If Indians could be depicted as vanished or primitive, settlers could claim ownership of lands and overwrite Indigenous communities under the guise of “civilizing” the “savage.”

Discursive violence, which feeds both physical violence and false narratives about Indigenous communities, has been especially prevalent in California. Rawls (1988) contends cultural erasure was justified by racist portrayals of Indigenous communities as primitive and unredeemable. Indigenous people were frequently portrayed as victims, laborers, or obstacles as their characteristics morphed over time to support the colonial agenda. As settler accounts reflected the prejudices of authors rather than the realities of Indigenous communities, Rawls emphasizes the need for critically analyzing such narratives. Similarly, Madley’s (2016) account of the genocide against Indigenous communities in California illustrates how the press often documented and encouraged systemic violence. Newspapers frequently downplayed massacres, excused offenders, and left out information about Indigenous communities, such as names and geographic specificity. Madley gives instances of military and vigilante campaigns that were openly supported by newspapers, including the Bloody Island, Cokadjal, and Clear Lake massacres. Madley also notes in an interview that the way people in California perceived Indigenous communities was “very much calibrated by journalistic representations” (Shirazi & Johnson, 2023, para. 11). Throughout the mid-1800s, many local newspapers portrayed Native Californians as either hostile savages or doomed victims, framing their elimination as natural and necessary. He later explains these frames “took the hand of the human...off the tiller of history, replaced it with nature. So people could then feel...mass murder was simply speeding a god ordained or naturally ordained process” (para. 26). Even well into the early 20th century, Bay Area news articles and government reports echoed these tropes, describing the Ohlone community in nostalgic terms as the “last straggling few” where “nothing is possible but annihilation” (“Columbus Day,” 1892) or casting them as primitive people unsuited for modern society.

Government institutions, most notably the federal recognition process, also perpetuate erasure through arbitrary archival interpretation. In her analysis of the Fernandeano Tataviam’s federal recognition petition,

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Montenegro (2019) highlights how colonial institutions' evidentiary standards privilege settler epistemologies. Her critique is especially relevant for document-based research, as she reveals how current archival sources often carry racial assumptions about Indigenous identity and overlook traditional knowledge systems. Rather than calling for more documentation, Montenegro argues for a decolonization of the mindsets through which existing records are interpreted. Chilcote (2024) similarly critiques the federal recognition process for its reliance on evidence "created by outside observers, like anthropologists and historians, to judge Native authenticity and political authority" (p. 37). Even when tribes submit documentation that meets BIA standards, preconceived assumptions about Indigenous authenticity often distort how the evidence is interpreted relative to the seven criteria. Despite these systemic issues, Chilcote illuminates how the San Luis Rey Band has continuously preserved its sovereignty and cultural identity despite enduring genocidal erasure and the broken federal recognition process. On another note, Goldberg and Champagne (2021) critique the federal acknowledgment process as a continuation of colonial control. They argue the process forces unrecognized tribes into a bind: to access legal rights and resources, tribes must conform to a settler-defined framework of Indigenous identity that often contradicts their own systems of governance. However, by expanding beyond the BIA's notion of "evidence," they counter any notion that the Fernandeano Tataviam Band of Mission Indians vanished after the Mission era as they resisted American settler influx. In many ways, the evidentiary standards used in the federal recognition process mirror the biases found in newspapers. Although newspapers themselves are admissible as evidence for federal acknowledgement, their content and rhetoric often perpetuated racist portrayals of Indigenous identity.

Within the Muwekma Ohlone scholarship specifically, narratives of erasure are contested through archaeological, ancient and modern DNA studies, and documentary practices. Contemporary scholars describe a longstanding "politics of erasure," where settler narratives cast Native American communities such as the Ohlone as vanished (Panich et al., 2024, para. 2). However, they also note archaeology's important role in foregrounding the Muwekma Ohlone's resistance to these narratives. In a separate article, Panich et al. (2024) leverage the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe as a case study in how the documentary record can reveal Indigenous agency. He argues that, despite their tendency to obscure Indigenous presence, "the documentary record demonstrates their continued presence" and offers glimpses into areas of daily Indigenous life (p. 507). Collaborating with the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe, Panich calls for dissolving the divide between "prehistory" and recent Indigenous life, leveraging "the archival record to find physical traces of a future that is still unfolding" (p. 508). Panich's case study serves as a strong methodology for structuring archival analysis. Additionally, a thorough historical account of the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe can be found in Leventhal's report on the burial site beneath the Holiday Inn in downtown San Jose (2021b). In addition to combating narratives promoted by colonial institutions, the tribe's ongoing participation in archaeological projects has provided a crucial link to their pre-contact past.

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While our paper primarily identifies the media's negative portrayals of Indigenous communities, we also acknowledge that such narratives of victimhood and "damage-centered research" risk reinforcing terminal narratives (Tuck, 2009, p. 1). Drawing on Tuck's call to emphasize the importance of Indigenous resistance, our paper spotlights how the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe challenged the identified discursive dispossession. Likewise, Schneider et al. (2020) also caution against accepting negative portrayals of Indigenous peoples at face value, noting that doing so risks reinforcing the logic of elimination. Instead, they call for re-centering historical interpretation of documentary records on Indigenous persistence and cultural resilience. Furthermore, Rawls (1988, p. xiv) notes many historical portrayals of California Indigenous people reveal less about their culture and more about the biases of those producing the works. While we do not dismiss the dominance of harmful stereotypes of Indigenous communities, our paper critically engages with them and emphasizes Muwekma Ohlone resistance in response.

Theoretical Gap

Although many prior studies have examined Indigenous erasure broadly, no study has analyzed the newspapers and government documents that propagated the narrative around the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe in specific. This represents a notable gap in the literature. Our study poses the following question to address this: How did records from 1850–1933 portray the Ohlone's identity, and in what ways did these portrayals influence the narrative around the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe?

Both scholarly and practical needs are met by this study. Academically, it advances knowledge of settler-colonial practices in the Bay Area by providing a case study on how newspapers sustained Indigenous erasure. Practically, it responds directly to challenges faced by the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe in their fight for their reaffirmation of the federally recognized status and offers a comprehensive record of the tribe's continued existence. As past efforts to locate documents were decentralized and hard to keep track of, this database project emerged in response to researchers' calls to create a centralized historical archive about the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe.

Roadmap

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. First, in the *Methods and Materials* section, we detail our data collection and analysis methods. This includes how we identified newspapers and government documents published between 1850 and 2000 and the qualitative coding approach we employed to identify themes in those texts. Our findings are then presented in the *Results* section, which is arranged around four main themes that surfaced from analyzing the sources. We present specific instances from the documents (quotations and descriptions) for each theme and examine how they best illustrate the relevant narrative patterns. In the *Discussion*, we delve into the implications of these findings. We discuss how the vanishing Indian narrative has

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had long-lasting policy effects and how acknowledging its construction can help guide current recognition efforts. Finally, we conclude by summarizing our contributions and suggestions.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

We conducted a qualitative historical content analysis of archival documents using a thematic analysis approach to explore representations of the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe. The method was inductive and interpretive, meaning themes emerged organically from a close reading of the historical texts, without predefined codes.

Data Sources and Collection

Our study analyzed 111 documents, divided into two distinct historical periods: 1850–1935 and 1960–2000. The year 1935 was specifically selected as an endpoint primarily because our collected archival evidence significantly diminishes after this point until 1960 onwards. Additionally, this timeframe closely aligns with the immediate aftermath of the 1927 report from Sacramento Superintendent Lafayette A. Dorrington, where the Muwekma’s ancestors were removed from the list of tribes under the jurisdiction of the Indian Service Bureau awaiting the purchase of homesite lands under the Congressional Appropriation Acts of 1906, 1908, and later years. Although our primary results section analyzes documents ending at 1935, our discussion section incorporates select documents from 1935 onwards to illustrate how these narrative trends have persisted into the modern day.

All documents have been vetted to guarantee subject matter relating to the Indigenous population of Alameda, Pleasanton, and the ethnohistoric Muwekma Ohlone territory of the greater San Francisco Bay Area or were explicitly noted as addressing California Indigenous peoples more broadly. However, it is important to note that documents during the time period of 1850–1935 were not directly using the name of “The Muwekma Ohlone Tribe,” but used the older name of “the Verona Band of Alameda County,” “Mission San Jose Indians,” or more generic nomenclature such as “Natives” or “Indian” with references to geographical location.

Our collected documents consisted primarily of government records and newspaper articles:

Government records included federal census documents, BIA correspondence between officials, and legal documents. We identified records relating to the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe by tracing references to the “Verona Band of Alameda County” and documents used in the Muwekma Ohlone’s federal recognition petition.

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Newspaper articles were gathered systematically from databases including Newspapers.com, Chronicling America (Library of Congress), and the California Digital Newspaper Collection. Keyword searches focused on terms like "Indian" in combination with geographic locations like "Pleasanton," "Sunol," "Niles," "Livermore," "Oakland," "Verona," and/or "Mission San Jose" to ensure coverage encompassed articles relating to the Ohlone. Articles primarily came from popular newspapers during this time period like *The San Francisco Call*, *The Morning Times*, *The Oakland Tribune*, *The Morning Call*, *The Oakland Enquirer*, and other regional newspapers.

Data Analysis

Three separate phases of analysis were carried out, each involving iterative, repeated reviews of the documents.

Round 1 (Descriptive Coding). Initially, we began by summarizing each document and quoting passages to establish relevance to Indigenous presence in the Bay Area. Details like "Existence of Native Americans near Pleasanton," "Existence of Native Americans near Sunol," and "Existence of Native Americans near Livermore" were recorded by preliminary codes, along with significant historical events like "Criticism of Lafayette Dorrington." In order to lay the foundation for more in-depth thematic analysis, our coding at this point was focused on precisely capturing the context of every article or government record.

Round 2 (Open Coding). In the second round, we looked closely at the documents again and identified new thematic patterns. In this round, we employed open coding, which allowed us to identify recurring themes and language in the dataset without adhering to a preset framework. During this phase, codes became increasingly interpretive, capturing early thematic trends like "Otherizing Language," "Generalizations," "White Community Backlash," and "Object of Study," among other observations.

Round 3 (Focused Thematic Coding and Subthemes). We thoroughly reevaluated the documents for our final coding round. We collectively divided the initial open codes into four overarching themes: Dehumanization, Erasure, Spectacle, and Resistance. Each identified theme and subtheme was supported by specific quotes and textual evidence. Documents that reflected more than one idea were coded with multiple themes, whereas documents that were purely descriptive and had little room for analysis were left uncoded.

We had peers and professors validate our interpretative analysis using the same coding definitions to guarantee the validity of the research. In order to eliminate recency bias, we also implemented iterative reviews of the coding over a period of weeks, regularly going over and revalidating the documents and codes for consistency. Additionally, we noted interactions between themes: for example, the frequent overlap between

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"Erasure" and "Dehumanization," which is subsequently explored in our findings and discussion sections and annotated in our dataset spreadsheet.

Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitive nature of the material, we exercised careful ethical considerations. In order to preserve historical authenticity, disparaging language from historical sources was explicitly quoted but was always viewed critically. Together with specialists from Santa Clara University and San Jose State University, we conducted this study after consulting and working closely with members of the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe. This collaboration made sure that our interpretations were accurate, culturally respectful, based on the community's current viewpoint.

Theme Explanations

To organize our database of historical documents, we identified four distinct thematic categories, each with their own sub-themes. The following four categories represent the ways the media portrayed the Ohlone's presence from 1850 to 2000: Erasure, Dehumanization, Spectacle, and Resistance.

Erasure. Erasure relates to the systemic removal of Ohlone presence in local texts, histories, and society (Den Ouden & O'Brien, 2013). Erasure occurs through the strictly woven colonial histories that sideline indigenous voices, placing the issues concerning tribes out of society and as "extinct." This form of targeted ignorance significantly downplayed Ohlone presence through the following subthemes:

Replacing refers to the process by which settler institutions actively obscure Indigenous presence. (Wolfe, 2006) Rather than simple neglect, replacing is an intentional act to overwrite Ohlone names, histories, and living communities with alternative settler narratives (O'Brien, 2010). Replacing can also manifest subtly, such as through the media's simplification of tribal histories into the story of a singular individual. For instance, in the *San Francisco Examiner* newspaper section "Tribe continues battle for federal recognition," Professor Alan Leventhal refused media interviews on behalf of Chairwoman Rosemary Cambra, noting that "Yes, she's very important... but the individual is a concept of the dominant culture" ("Tribe Continues Battle," 1995).

Firsting is a discursive strategy where settler narratives position themselves as the beginning of a region's history, thereby displacing or minimizing Indigenous presence that predates colonization (O'Brien, 2010). When settlers are said to have "founded" or "civilized" a place, Indigenous histories are reframed as irrelevant or forgotten.

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Lasting is a theme that captures how media representations often situate the Ohlone in the past tense, describing them as extinct or vanished (O'Brien, 2010). Rather than acknowledging continuity, survival, or revival, the dominant media narrative uses a tone of finality to insist that the Ohlone are part of a finished story.

Dehumanization. Dehumanization includes the documents that separate the Ohlone from the rest of colonial society, portraying the tribe as “other” exotic beings. This process is often used by settlers to justify continued oppression by stripping the tribe of their humanity through the following subthemes:

Generalizations refers to the flattening of Ohlone identity through broad, undifferentiated labels which erase the specificities of tribal experience, history, and political claim (Madley, 2016, p. 28). Media discourse, by invoking generic Indigenous tropes, sidelines the unique cultural and geographic position of the Muwekma's ancestors and subsumes their voice under generalized racial categories like “Indian.” The result is a homogenized public understanding of Indigenous identity.

Othering captures the rhetorical and visual strategies used to position the Ohlone as fundamentally different and inferior to the dominant settler society (Carnes, 1999). In media portrayals, this often takes the form of distancing language or cultural essentialism that emphasizes “strangeness” over similarity.

Object of Study refers to the treatment of the Ohlone not as a living community with political and cultural agency, but rather as material for scientific inquiry or institutional display (Wood, 2018). This dynamic places Ohlone people within a framework of extraction, where their value is determined by the knowledge they can provide to settler institutions, rather than their human worth.

Spectacle. Spectacle concerns the dramatization of media stories covering the Muwekma's ancestors during the time period. The media often portrayed Indigenous communities as sources of intrigue, controversy, or sentimental fascination for the sake of audience engagement. This framing transforms Indigenous existence into a form of consumption, contributing to the trivialization of Indigenous struggles through the following subthemes:

Sensationalization refers to the media's amplification of ordinary or bureaucratic developments into extraordinary, emotionally charged events (Asmi, 2017, p. 4). This includes exaggerated headlines, evocative language, and disproportionate coverage that seeks to attract public attention rather than to inform. In relation to Indigenous communities, sensationalization often entailed framing their conflicts, ceremonial practices, or assertions of identity as provocative or controversial.

Deaths and Violence refers to media portrayals of death and violence within tribal communities. The coverage of such events over the time period represents the media's tendency to only report on Indigenous

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stories when deaths or violence occur, focusing on maximizing media engagement while misrepresenting the narratives of Indigenous communities (Rawls, 1988, p. 172).

White Community Backlash captures the media's disproportionate focus on reactions from white or settler communities in response to Indigenous activity, especially when such activity is framed as encroaching upon or conflicting with settler norms. Rather than offering Indigenous voices space to articulate their goals or histories, coverage frequently privileges the opposition. The media's emphasis on these reactions serves not only to dramatize Indigenous movements, but also to reassert settler authority through the lens of public opinion.

Resistance. Resistance refers to the moments in media discourse where dominant settler narratives are disrupted, challenged, or reframed in ways that acknowledge Indigenous agency. Resistance in media does not always take the form of explicit advocacy; it may instead appear through subtle shifts in narrative framing, the inclusion of Indigenous speakers, or the rejection of dehumanizing tropes. As a theme, resistance allows us to identify how journalistic practices disrupt the ongoing project of erasure and instead affirm the continuity of Indigenous communities.

Contradicting captures instances in which media narratives push back against dominant portrayals of the Ohlone as extinct or illegitimate (Smith, 2012). These narratives may reject assumptions of disappearance, expose inconsistencies in settler logic, or challenge official government claims through critical reporting.

Spotlighting Tribal Voices/Issues refers to media portrayals that center the perspectives, stories, and concerns of Indigenous people (Den Ouden & O'Brien, 2013). Spotlighting shifts the focus toward the lived realities of the tribe and ensures that Indigenous perspectives are not supplementary or symbolic, but essential to the narrative itself.

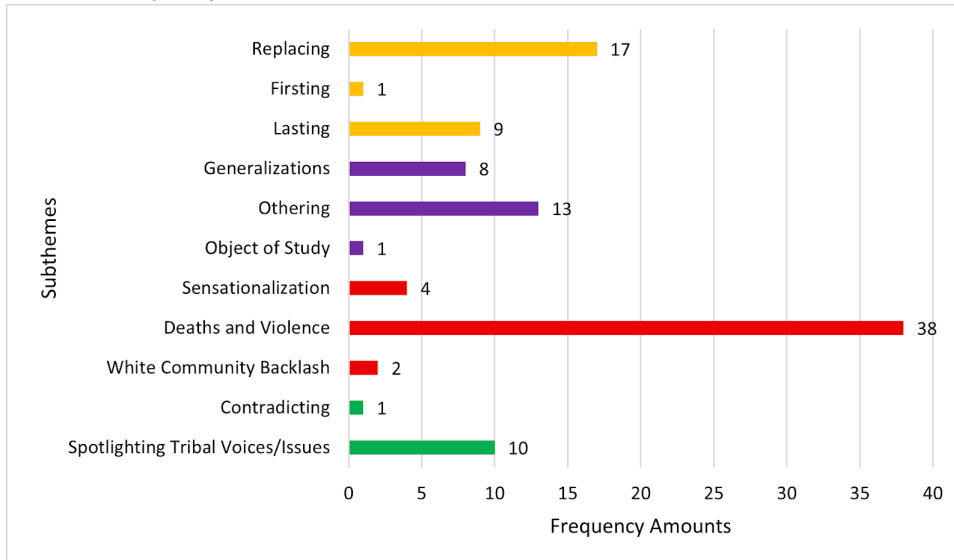
RESULTS

The graphs below break down the prevalence of key themes used to portray the Ohlone from 1850–1935 and how they continued into 1960–2000. These figures are a tool to visualize the contents of the document database and offer additional context for the Results section's analysis.

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Figure 1

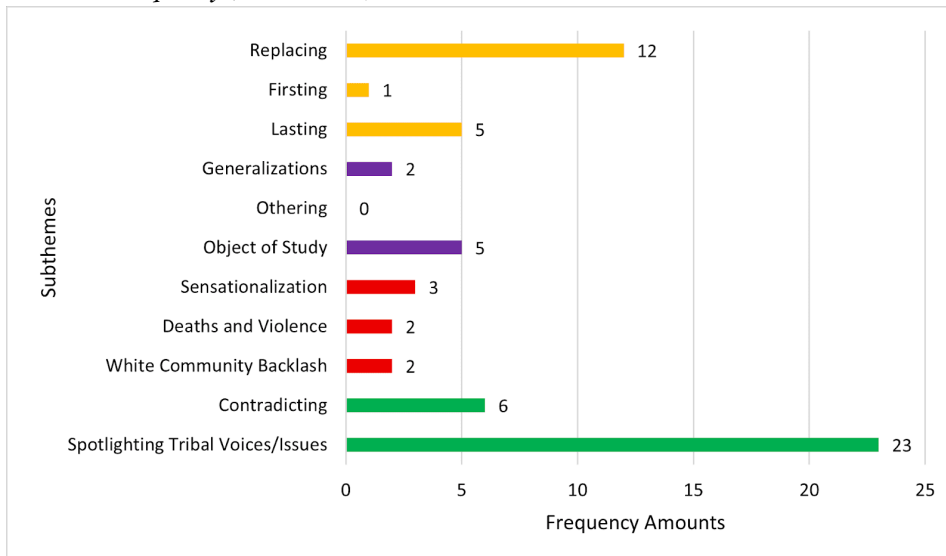
Subtheme Frequency (1850–1935)



Note. This figure provides the exact frequency of each sub-theme during the time period 1850–1935, visualizing the media’s reliance on certain tactics as a preferred means of marginalization.

Figure 2

Subtheme Frequency (1960–2000)



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Note. This figure provides the exact frequency of each sub-theme during the time period 1960–2000.

In 1850–1935, Deaths/Violence is the most recurrent theme, with over 38 instances. The staggering frequency with which the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe was mentioned only in the context of deaths and violence demonstrates the media’s persistent dramatization of tribal affairs for engagement. The media’s pattern reinforces a terminal narrative that framed California’s Indigenous peoples as destined to disappear. A drastic shift between the two time periods occurs, as 1960–2000 contains only 1 instance of Deaths/Violence.

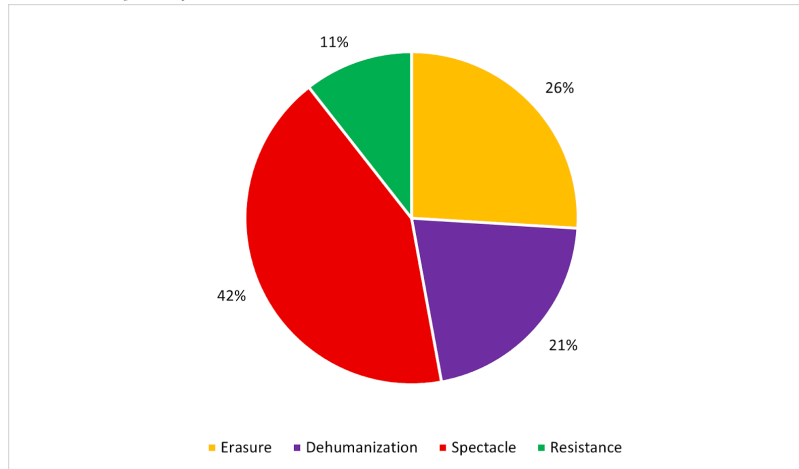
Furthermore, when combined with a significant stagnation in the prevalence of Lasting and Generalizations, the documents demonstrate that knowledge about basic history and respect for the tribe had improved by the 1960s. Media tactics capitalizing on the ignorance of the settler community grew less effective, as societal attitudes shifted toward greater respect – evidenced by increased use of the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe’s actual name and a decline in settler claims of Muwekma Ohlone extinction.

Moreover, the consistency in the frequency of Replacing and decrease in Firsting reflects the growth of the settler community. As settlers grew in population, they displaced and accelerated the gentrification of the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe (Den Ouden & O’Brien, 2013), making it easier for journalists to frame the tribe as the savage predecessors of the settler community and overwrite Indigenous histories with fabricated narratives. Lasting’s tactics of framing Native American communities as “extinct” became increasingly difficult in a time period where local tribes had found a public foothold in society. Finally, subthemes such as Object of Study and Contradicting appear far more frequently in 1960–2000 compared to 1850-1933. This shift reflects the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe’s intensified resistance during the 1960–2000 time period, including disputes over university repatriation and increased media attention to their activism.

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Figure 3

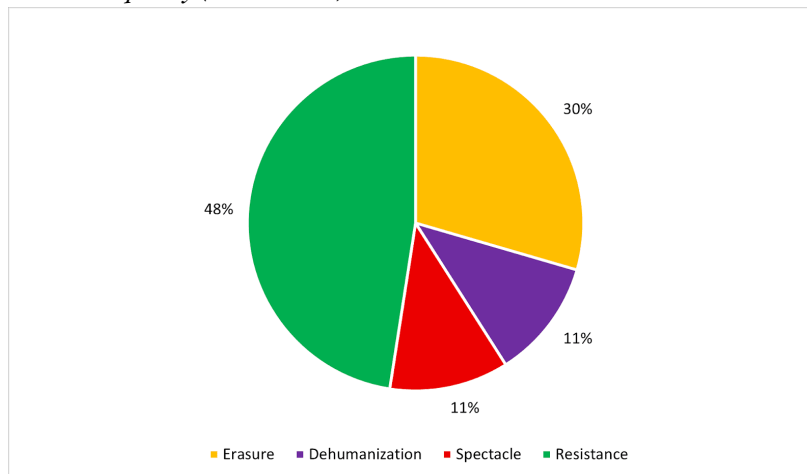
Theme Frequency (1850–1935)



Note. This figure documents the percent amount of each theme during the time period 1850–1935.

Figure 4

Theme Frequency (1960–2000)



Note. This figure documents the percent amount of each theme during the time period 1960–2000.

Figures 3 and 4 offer a glimpse at the distribution of the four core themes among the database during the two time periods. From 1850–1935, the media drifted to Erasure and Spectacle more often than Dehumanization or Resistance, reflecting the era’s widespread racist attitudes and the public’s appetite for settler dominance. Nearly half of the documents from the 1850–1935 time period display Spectacle,

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demonstrating how the Native community was regularly exploited as a means of entertainment and engagement for the Bay Area media. As analyzed in Figures 1 & 2, the lack of information among the settler community regarding local tribes made them susceptible to exaggerated media accounts about Native customs. Sensationalizing tribal affairs was an effective tactic to attract readers during the 1850–1935 period, as widespread ignorance about local tribes made it easy for audiences to accept exaggerated or misleading portrayals as truth. Meanwhile, the regularity of Erasure stems from the deep-seated biases of Bay Area colonial society, which inevitably shaped local media narratives.

While Erasure may appear to remain consistent between both time periods, the specific subthemes switch from earlier narratives of Firsting to Replacing, while Lasting stays relatively consistent. On the contrary, Spectacle and Dehumanization both shrink significantly, with Spectacle decreasing by 31% from 42% to 11% and Dehumanization decreasing by 10% from 21% to 11%. These trends reflect a media shift toward objective reporting with subtle forms of bias rather than overt racism to generate attention. As settler society advanced, modern development became a societally acceptable way to erase Indigenous histories.

The other notable change between the thematic presences of the time periods is the increased frequency of Resistance documents. Documents containing themes of Resistance jumped from 11% in the 1850–1935 time period to 48% in the 1965–2000 time period. This can be attributed both to the Muwekma Ohlone's intensified activism and the media's broader trend toward objective journalism.

Erasure

Erasure emerges as a dominant strategy across California media and government narratives to delegitimize Indigenous presence in the Bay Area through replacing, firsting, and lasting.

James E. Jenkin's 1923 Reno Agency Narrative Report, an annual report to the Reno Indian Agency, epitomizes the theme of **replacing** (Jenkins, 1923). Despite being presented as a general report on Native communities in California, the Ohlone are specifically listed as "Alameda (County) Verona 30" (p. 5). The primary goal of the report is quite clear: "to overcome... the old traditions and prejudices that have kept the Indian and white man as far apart as the poles" (p. 2). The report reframes Native practices as barriers to unity and settler identity as the norm by portraying Native culture as a "prejudice" that must be overcome.

Additionally, Jenkins explains that ceremonial customs such as "dances," "big times," "council gatherings," etc., are "the principal factor in the prevention of the Indian's thrift and advancement" and should be "curbed" or "abolished" (p. 11). This framing reduces cultural expression to a dysfunction that needs to be fixed and a regressive habit that prevents Native people from succeeding as defined by settlers. His perspective is representative of the colonial mentality prevalent at the time: cultural eradication as the only way to advance.

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Because of the persistence of these customs, Jenkins laments that "the ultimate civilization of the Indian... seems rather remote" (p. 11). Erasure in the name of "advancement" is justified by treating the very survival of Indigenous identity as the primary cause of stagnation.

Indigenous methods of healing are also targeted. The report blames disease outbreaks on "additional physicians... to combat the evil influences of these Indian 'doctors,'" ignoring the role of settlers in causing those outbreaks through colonization, land dispossession, and the cruel living conditions they imposed (p. 15). Jenkin's attempt to reframe settler-imposed issues as Indigenous shortcomings is known as scapegoating. In order to undermine traditional healers and portray settler intervention as rescue rather than intrusion, he even fabricates the statistic that "95% of whom [Indians] would like to be rid of this element but lack the courage to take a stand for their own independence" (p.15).

Jenkins dismisses Indigenous land stewardship based on settler expectations of productivity, claiming that "the Indian as a farmer has never been a success" (p. 21). The report dismisses self-advocacy by Indigenous communities as "propaganda" that only "agitates" and "delays" the government's plans (p. 26). Speaking up is portrayed as a threat in this context, where the settler narrative only accepts submission. When combined, the Reno Agency Narrative Report creates a world where Native communities are either erased or remade.

Firsting operates by redefining when history begins and who counts as its author. The *San Francisco Call* article in 1892 covering a Columbus Day celebration at Mission San Jose declares that "people connected in one way or another with the history of this country since California has begun her wonderful history" ("Columbus Day"). The subtle phrasing of California's "wonderful history" is framed as beginning with colonization, implicitly erasing the thousands of years of Ohlone presence that preceded it. California's "real" history begins not with the Ohlone, but with the arrival of European settlers.

The theme of **lasting**, or the portrayal of Native people as a vanishing population, appears repeatedly in California newspapers as a tool to erase the Muwekma's ancestors. The same article reporting on the Columbus Day event at Mission San Jose describes the Indigenous attendees as "the last straggling few in all this part of the State," framing them as aged relics "bent and white with age" who exist solely to decorate a settler celebration. Despite explicitly mentioning younger generations, the article insists that "amalgamation is a failure, nothing is possible but annihilation," reducing the community to a "squalid remnant" that evokes only "pity." By collapsing multigenerational presence into a narrative of inevitable extinction, the article legitimizes settler dominance while denying the continued resurgence of Indigenous life.

Other newspapers echo this rhetoric. *The Oakland Times* in 1897 writes that the tribe of Pleasanton Indians, once "numerous less than fifty years ago," had been reduced to "only a few miserable remnants," their decline blamed solely on disease that spread like a "consuming fire" ("Disappearance of Pleasanton Indians").

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The *Oakland Enquirer* in 1899, reporting on the death of Tausino Sanchumi, a tribal member, declares that “California Indians are a short-lived race” and dismissively adds that “the age of an Indian... does not particularly matter” (“Death of Tausino Sanchumi”). By normalizing disappearance and trivializing survival, settler media presents Indigenous death as natural and inevitable.

Dehumanization

Dehumanization was a popular tactic by the Bay Area media pre-1935 as a method of alienating the Native American population by portraying them as generalized stereotypes, treating them as objects of study, and framing them as the other.

The media often relied on sweeping **generalizations** to collapse the diversity of California’s Native communities into a single stereotype rooted in colonial fantasy. A newspaper excerpt from the *Oakland Tribune* reveals the extent to which derogatory language was used to condemn specific tribes and separate them from the romanticized, generalistic view of California’s native population (“Nusbaumer Indians,” 1891). The section criticizes an *Enquirer* article, claiming their account of a dignified tribal elder’s death romanticizes the California Natives as “the simon-pure, number one, original Fenimore Cooper type of noble red men.” The writer refers to the Native Californians as a single, unambiguous population, generalizing the local Native tribes under the false, idealized notion of a noble savage. Fenimore Cooper is infamous for his unrealistic depictions of Native communities at the time. In *Savagism and Civilization*, Pearce (1967) states, “Cooper was interested in the Indian not for his own sake but for the sake of his relationship to the civilized men who were destroying him.” The writer’s false narratives of the ‘ideal’ Native American shaped the beliefs of California settlers, perpetuating false media portrayals that stereotyped and generalized Indigenous people under a single stereotype.

Furthermore, the media often used derogatory language to perpetuate the theme of **othering**: the view that Indigenous people are inherently inferior and fundamentally incompatible with settler society. The very same article explains there “would be hard to find anything lower than the Digger (nusbaumer) Indians hereabouts.” The writer refers to the tribe as an encroaching, hostile presence that is fundamentally at odds with the idyllic settler community. But the goal of the excerpt extends beyond attacking the Native community and reveals the colonial drive to subjugate and present the neighboring tribes as inherently inferior. The subject of the criticized *Enquirer* article, and thereby the *Tribune* excerpt, revolve around the portrayal of a deceased tribal elder. The article claims that even the most dignified members of the community were fundamentally lesser human beings, calling the late elder, only referred to as “the old ‘Digger Queen,’” “particularly dirty, idle and ignorant.” The media’s attempts at portraying the “most dignified” of the Native community as underneath settler norms represent the drive to otherize the Native community in an attempt to dehumanize the tribes.

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Othering through the media also persisted through harsh criticisms of Native culture. Ongoing events, such as a smallpox outbreak in Pleasanton, would be turned into opportunities for settler reporters to scapegoat Native culture as the source of modern problems. An article published by the *Oakland Times* in 1897 claims that "Smallpox was another terrible scourge rendered unnaturally fatal in its attacks by Indian habit of going into the water while the fever was upon them" ("Disappearance of Pleasanton Indians"). Rather than acknowledging colonial living conditions or lack of access to care, the article blames Native lifeways, presenting Indigenous culture itself as a form of contamination. Portraying the tribe as victims of their own culture rather than victims of a disease outbreak perpetuates the notion that the local tribes were intrinsically below colonial society. The Natives were not seen as suffering members of the community, but as a foreign object of criticism devoid of the integral elements of humanity.

Another form of dehumanization occurred when Native individuals were reduced to an **Object of Study** like historical artifacts or academic curiosities. An article from the *Daily Review* in 1929 discusses the life of Jose Binoco, claiming that he was "a relic and a memory of the days of the Spanish Dons in California" and that "His life has been one of faithful service to his various masters" ("Jose Binoco's Last Days"). The media portrays individual Native narratives through the lens of unconditional service, stripping their humanistic qualities and furthering the idea that the local Natives are historical remnants that only exist to be examined to serve settler colonial interests. The article speaks about Binoco's life as an object of study in an effort to dehumanize native populations and sideline important indigenous narratives.

Spectacle

Spectacle refers to the sensationalization; white community backlash; and excessive focus on deaths, violence, and funerals of Native peoples in the media in an attempt to alienate tribal communities.

One of the clearest examples of **sensationalization** appears in a 1903 article from the *Oakland Office of the San Francisco Call*, which covers a murder investigation in Alameda County ("Murder of Manuel"). The article deploys spectacle by emphasizing the belligerent sentiment against the white community and portraying the tribal community as a roadblock in the investigation. The initial context of the article sets up a savage, emotionally-charged view of the tribal community, claiming that "Among the throng of interested and belligerent red men that mutterings of vengeance were heard this morning." The writer uses racially charged language to otherize the tribe before sensationalizing their anguish and portraying them as dangerous to the white community, also representing **White Community Backlash**. But the reporter furthers this narrative of intercommunity discord by claiming that "sentiment is strong against the rancherie." These sweeping emotional claims, offered without quotes or specific attribution, are a telltale sign of sensationalization where the reporter is prioritizing engagement with the audience rather than factual representation.

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Sensationalization can also be observed in coverage of otherwise neutral discoveries, which are turned into opportunities to sensationalize media engagement. The discovery of skeletons underneath Stanford in 1912 shows how early finds were turned into further attempts to otherize tribal communities, as The San Francisco Examiner reports that "giant skeletons" and that "the inhabitants apparently were neither warlike nor energetic" ("Stanford Skeletons"). The reporter's exaggerated language and speculative tone frames the remains as the exploration of a novel species rather than the remnants of humans.

Spectacle also extends to the media's portrayal of **death and violence** within Native communities. These incidents were often displayed as savage spectacles for settler audiences with little regard for context or empathy. One example appears in the *San Francisco Call's* coverage of a Native woman killed by a train near Pleasanton ("Indian Woman," 1900). The article treats her death as filler content, offering no details beyond her race and the bare facts of the incident with her name never being mentioned. The omission reflects the paper's view that her identity was not worth verifying, useful only for occupying column space. This is not an isolated pattern. Across the archive, Indigenous people are rarely mentioned unless their lives intersect with violence, death, or conflict. By limiting coverage to such moments, the media reduces Native people to symbols of disorder or tragedy while simultaneously portraying the Native community as in-fighting to extinction.

Resistance

Resistance in media about Indigenous communities emerges in moments where dominant settler narratives are contradicted or disregarded to spotlight tribal voices.

One of the clearest examples of **contradiction** appears in coverage of Tausino Sanchumi, a Pleasanton tribal member whose age and connection to the Mission San Jose were hotly contested across local newspapers. In accounts from the *Oakland Enquirer*, Sanchumi's claims are aggressively dismissed ("Death of Tausino Sanchumi," 1899). One article mocks the idea that he was over 120 years old, asserting that "California Indians are a short-lived race" and claiming it is "very doubtful whether any one of them has lived to be a hundred years old." The article further undercuts testimony of other Indigenous people by stating "the natives seldom know how old they are" because they "keep no record of the rolling years" and dismissively adds that "the age of an Indian... does not particularly matter." Even when referencing a Spanish priest's historical account, the piece dismisses it, arguing that "of course the Indians must have been lying to him... very probably they did not know it."

Yet this narrative is directly contradicted by other articles, which offer grounded accounts of Sanchumi's life. The *San Francisco Call* reports that "many of his Indian companions think he was at least 130 years of age" and presents a coherent chronology:

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Sanchumi was 17 years old, when he came to Mission San Jose and was a planter of the cross at that place long before the old mission was established. Years after, when the first shovel of earth was turned for the construction of the mission, he helped in the work. (“Death of 120-Year-Old Tausino Sanchumi,” 1899)

Unlike *the Oakland Enquirer*, *The San Francisco Call* refrains from mockery and uses specific timelines and references to local geography to articulate the validity of Tausino Sanchumi’s claims.

The contradiction is reinforced by additional coverage by Father Montaner, a Spanish priest, of Felipe José Antonio, another Native elder from the same region, who claimed he was present at the founding of Mission San Jose in 1797. In stark contrast to the *Enquirer*’s dismissal of Native memory, *the Oakland Times* describes how Felipe gave “an intelligible account of the ceremonies at the foundation” and recalled being “at the head of a family” at the time (“Felipe Antonio Witness to Mission Founding,” 1897). Importantly, the legitimacy of his testimony was not based solely on oral recollection: Father Montaner cross-referenced Felipe’s story with Catholic mission records, citing the specific records in the newspaper where the mission “preached to the army and to the natives who were there.” Despite how institutional records were the very kind the *Oakland Enquirer* claims to trust, Father Montaner’s findings seems to be completely ignored. Even the *Oakland Enquirer* admits that other Indians claiming to have witnessed the mission’s founding “entered into details to prove to him [Father Montaner] their good faith.”

While the idea that Felipe or Tausino Sanchumi lived to 130 years old may stretch plausibility, the point is not whether every biographical detail is verifiable. The significance lies in how these testimonies intervene in dominant settler narratives. They resist the logic of elimination by asserting Indigenous presence even when settler narratives try to write them out.

Another form of resistance surfaces when media coverage **spotlights tribal issues**. An *Oakland Tribune* article reports on Congressman James G. Frear’s harsh criticism of Lafayette Dorrington and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (“Congressman James G. Frear Criticizing Dorrington,” 1926). Frear states clearly that the Bureau is “more interested in perpetuating itself than in looking after its 225,000 charges” and accuses it of robbing Native people of their “money and rights.” The article outlines how the Bureau controls \$1.6 billion in Native property and blocks individuals, many of whom are U.S. citizens, from selling land, writing wills, or hiring attorneys without government permission. Frear even cites specific abuses, like taking \$100,000 from the Navajo Nation for the Navajo Bridge and removing Native children from their families without consent. At a time when officials like Jenkins pushed narratives of Native inferiority and assimilation, Frear’s words stand out as a rare but meaningful instance of political advocacy. His speech directly confronts the federal system’s abuses, and the article’s decision to highlight it interrupts the usual pattern of erasure in the press.

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DISCUSSION

This study reveals that media portrayals of the Ohlone overwhelmingly reproduced settler-colonial narratives through three themes: erasure, dehumanization, and spectacle, while only rarely offering resistance through Indigenous-centered framing.

The primary theoretical contribution of the paper reveals how Bay Area media alienated tribal communities from 1850 to 1935. These narratives perpetuated divisions that isolated the Indigenous community from settler society, perpetuating discourse that eventually excluded the tribe from federal protections. The media employed narratives of disappearance and replacement to erase Native communities, spreading the fiction that no tribal presence remained in the Bay Area. Articles attempted to dehumanize these communities, generalizing their issues and posing them at fundamental odds with settler society. Tribal issues were used as entertainment for the non-tribal audience, with the media making a spectacle out of tribal affairs and events. Most significantly, Indigenous people were mostly only mentioned when death, violence, or funerals occurred, framing their identity solely through disappearance. The documents reflect a positive feedback loop that amplified the discriminatory, sensationalized voices of Bay Area media outlets. Newspapers during the time represented an echo chamber of racism that blocked Indigenous voices and grew a barrier between the settler community and the Bay Area Indigenous community.

The secondary theoretical contribution stems from the 1960–2000s group of documents analyzed in the database, where we examined whether the previously mentioned themes continued into the modern media landscape. While many biases persisted into the 1960s-2000s media, they acted as more of a subconscious influence rather than overt, deliberate means of attack. The media shifted to a passive stance of objectivity, still harming tribes by neglecting their voices and highlighting white community outbursts but unknowingly supporting the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe by featuring their resistance efforts as well. Resistance efforts from the tribe increased in frequency during the time period, with the impartiality of the media serving as a means of conveying the Muwekma Ohlone's resistance to many in the Bay Area. So, while our discussion praises the media for conveying the Muwekma Ohlone's narrative of resistance, it is important to note that this is not an acquittal of the outlets' harmful biases but an acknowledgement of their unintentional support.

During this time period, some modern settler news outlets acted as a mode of resistance for the Muwekma Ohlone's voice. Many acts of resistance during this time period became more pronounced in media discussion, starting a well-documented trend that resembles modern-day advocacy from the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe. A notable act of resistance commemorated by the media was the occupation of Alcatraz in 1969. Coverage in Bay Area news outlets stretched beyond objective reporting, shifting to clever criticisms and editorials as seen through a cartoon from the Sacramento Bee mocking the federal government (Oglesby, 1969).

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Figure 5:

Alcatraz Cartoon (1969)



Note. This figure is a cartoon found in an issue of the Sacramento Bee that depicts the Alcatraz takeover in 1969.

While such writings and depictions resembled the subconscious biases seen in the media from 1850 to 1935, such as otherizing stereotypes, the actions of the media in this later period seemed to show support for local Native communities. Furthermore, in 1994, the San Francisco Examiner documented the local American Indian Music and Cultural Festival, acknowledging that “the festival celebrates federal recognition of the Ohlone-Muwekma tribe, part of the original group that claimed title to the Presidio land” (Constantine, 1994). The public celebration of the Muwekma Ohlone’s continued existence runs in direct contradiction to the narratives perpetuated by agencies like the BIA that the tribe died off. The report featuring the act of resistance solidifies the counter-narrative that the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe was wronged and deserve federal recognition, demonstrating how the media acted as a means of supporting the tribe’s fight in the modern era.

However, many media outlets during this time period failed to interact with tribal perspectives, highlighting the critical nature of local companies, politicians, and anthropologists that rejected the Muwekma Ohlone’s efforts for reclamation. An example of leaving out tribal perspectives can be seen in 1989, after Stanford University made the decision to return 550 remains to the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe. Articles from Bay Area news outlets in response to the university’s decision reveal modern colonial perspectives about Native

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communities, as the reporters omit any direct input of tribal members and place the spotlight on anthropologists criticizing the decision. The reporter from the Hartford Courant only quotes such anthropologists, such as previous chairman of the Smithsonian's anthropology department Donald Ortner, saying, "From a scientific standpoint, this is a very bad move...there is going to be a terrible price that will have to be paid down the road" ("Indian Remains to Be Returned to Tribe," 1989). This is the primary difference between the Bay Area media's coverage of Native communities before and after 1960. Instead of directly disparaging tribes, the articles passively reinforce negative biases and viewpoints, frequently by omission or subtle discrimination.

Practical Implications and Future Research Avenues

The results of this study have a number of applications. They first draw attention to the necessity for historians and archivists to critically analyze sources. The historical background and biases of settler-authored sources must be critically evaluated by interpreters, who must acknowledge that these sources frequently, whether on purpose or accidentally, misrepresent Indigenous communities. Second, the study emphasizes how crucial it is to improve the way historical evidence is assessed during the federal recognition procedure. Officials evaluating recognition petitions must recognize how newspapers and documents written by settlers may represent colonial biases of Indigenous "authenticity," since they are admissible as evidence. Federal recognition must expand beyond archives influenced by colonial narratives of dispossession to include community-verified forms of continuity—such as intergenerational land use at harvesting sites, oral genealogies maintained through kin networks, and ceremonial practices tied to geographical regions. Lastly, future researchers can use the document database created by this project as a central location to arrange documents about the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe.

The paper does, however, have a number of limitations. First, the inability to track theme transitions during significant policy shifts like World War II and House Concurrent Resolution 108 (*BLA Termination*, 2024) is a result of the exclusion of documents from 1935 to 1960 (*Muwekma Timeline*, n.d.). Our study cannot adequately capture the changes in media portrayal if it does not look at this time period. Secondly, the document database is not all-inclusive. Other newspapers about the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe may be found in existing databases by broadening keyword searches beyond "Indian" and modifying geographic filters. Incorporating other archives, like Gale's Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers, will also yield more documents. Third, while the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe was a valuable case study, extrapolating these results to other tribes runs the risk of ignoring regional and political variations. Fourth, the evidence used in this study is primarily composed of reports and media that are discriminatory and biased. Other types of evidence can be used to track the continuity and historical record of the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe, including mortuary patterning, grave assemblages, economic interactions, and other archaeological indicators (Leventhal, 2021a).

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These results provide a number of directions for further investigation. The wider trends measured in this study might be supported by a comparison of newspaper representations of other Indigenous communities in California. Future research could also examine the oral history of the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe, looking at the story surrounding them outside of written records. Furthermore, studying earlier eras, like the missionary era in California, may also shed light on the genesis of these kinds of stories. The harsh look at biased anthropological and mission records also sheds light on the evidentiary standard for federal recognition, as the clear biases in these archives should force the government to rethink why such documents are used as evidence in the first place.

Conclusion

This study of how the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe is portrayed in the Bay Area media provides insight into the settler colonial strategies employed to create divisions between Indigenous communities and colonial society. With voices spreading false information and inflated facts to Bay Area communities, the media's role in fostering divisions is far more obvious than previously believed. By analyzing the persistence of settler colonial themes in contemporary media, this work also offers context for the subtle biases that still affect marginalized tribes today. Methods of resisting these erasure narratives and securing federal recognition can lie in the renaming of ancestral heritage sites, public trails, and historic places of significance in the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe's ancestral language (Chochenyo). Reclamation through language asserts the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe's presence, as observed by the changing of the Guadalupe River site to Thamien Rummey (Leventhal, 2021b). Such acts of defiance ensure the Muwekma Ohlone's voice will not be washed away by the false narratives of settler communities.

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