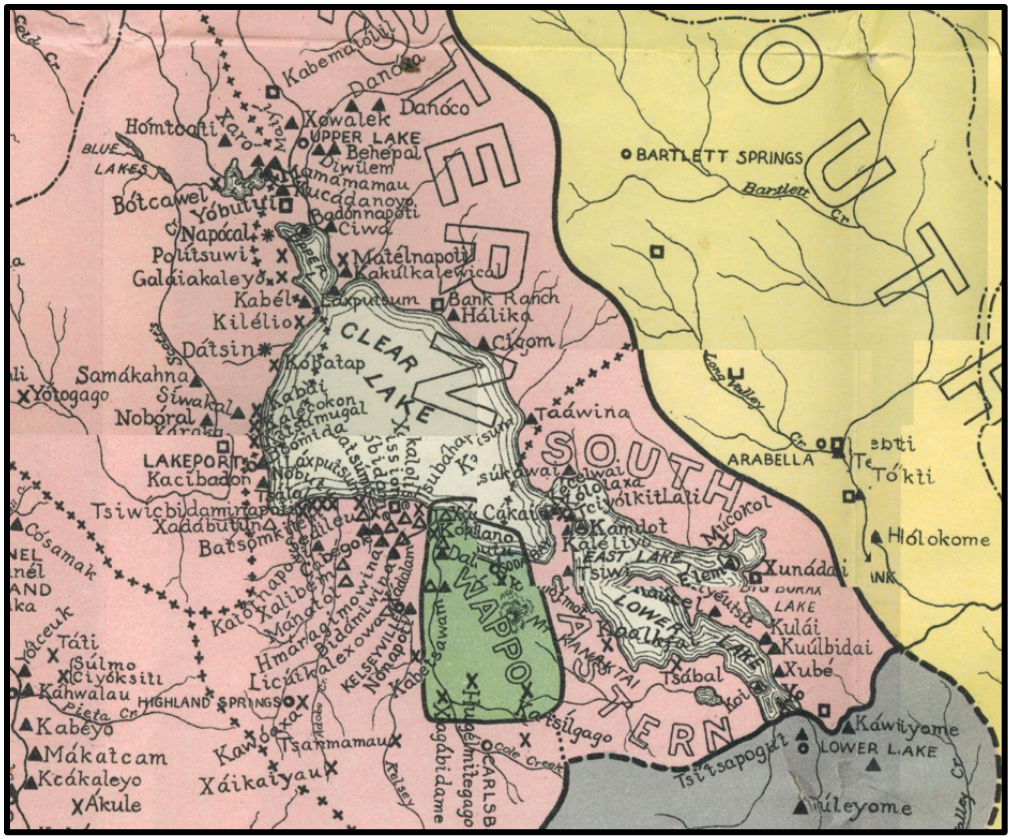
THE LANGUAGE OF SILENCE by Jeanine Pfeiffer



Source: S.A. Barrett, 1908. *The Ethno-geography of the Pomo and Neighboring Indians*. University California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology, Vol. 6 No. 1; excerpted from map on Page 333.

Littoral zone: the shallowest part of a lake encompassing the shoreline and associated vegetation; the area most vulnerable to erosion and degradation.

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At the northernmost tip of California's largest freshwater lake stands a small hillock that used to be an island. The island, known in Before-time as *Bo-no-po-ti*, was encircled by massive clusters of blue-green tule reeds, their feet submerged in clear waters, their heads tipped with starbursts of copper flowers. Towering over most humans,

the tule marshlands embraced all manners of aquatic life: dense clusters of endemic fish, waterfowl, tule elk, tule perch, and the world's largest garter snake.

In Before-time, the lake was called *Ka-ba-tin* and its overlooking, cone-shaped volcanic mountain named *Kno-htai* for its resemblance of a woman (*htai*) wearing a woven hat (*kno*). When the waters of Kabatin encircled Bonopoti, locals caught steelhead trout and Pacific lamprey year-round, and each spring partook of fish spawnings by the millions, orgies of glistening splittail and hitch overcrowding streams feeding the lake. The island's people, the *Ba-don-na-poti,* ate tule tubers and wove tule into everything that one could possibly craft with water reeds: baskets and boats, dolls and duck decoys, huts and hats, mats and medicines.

The Badonnapoti lived in close proximity to dozens of other tribal bands whose aboriginal rights for the lake and lakeside territories stretched back over twelve thousand years, bands later grouped under the misnomer "Pomo[i]": the Shigom and Xabahnapoh on the eastern shores, the Qulahlapoh on the western shores; the Danoxa, Kaiyo-Matuku, Xowalek, and Yobotui to the north, the Kulanapo to the south, the Elem and Kamdot to the southeast; and the Koi in the western marshes, along with the Howalek, Boalke, Kómli, and many others.

My mouth does not know how to pronounce these names, and my fingers only recently learned how to type them. This is a purely scientific form of ignorance.

Ecologists are taught the Latinate names of everything we can see: flowering and non-flowering plants, fungi, insects, amphibians, reptiles, fish, crustaceans, birds, mammals, and microbes. We memorize the names of soil types, geological formations, biological assemblages, and climatological regimes. But we do not learn, and cannot recount, anything about the peoples who knew these creatures and phenomena far more intimately, and for many more centuries, than our discipline has been around.

Ignorance begets disassociation begets loss. According to ethnographers, the languages of the inhabitants of Kabatin's lands are extinct. Their descendants contest this, asserting that once-spoken tongues are sleeping, waiting to be woken. I know of one tribe's efforts to bring back their language after all the Native speakers walked on: five

years and two PhD scholars later, they are still assembling a basic dictionary. For this lake, and these waters, we can only peel back the layers of loss, one syllable at a time.

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In the After-time of the 19th century, the Badonnapoti had the horrible luck of being the scapegoat tribe for celebrated young pioneers Andrew Kelsey and Charles Stone. Driven out of Midwestern towns angered by their illegal land-grabbing schemes, Kelsey and Stone ultimately settled by Kabatin lake on land purchased from Captain Salvador Vallejo, a military commander credited with founding Napa and Lake counties and leading field operations under the Mexican flag "against dissident Indian tribes," setting the stage for later displacement of Natives onto inadequate land parcels known as rancherias. The pioneers took full advantage of local resources: hundreds of tribespeople built Kelsey and Stone's adobe house and corral, countless tribal women pounded flour for them, and poorly compensated tribal men looked after their cattle herds.

While in their twenties, Kelsey and Stone distinguished themselves with cruelty: starving and enslaving local tribes, selling them off like livestock or forcing them to work on their ranch, hauling tribal men to gold mines and feeding their rations to other miners, punishing tribal members who dared to hunt by hanging them by their hands from trees or shooting at them to impress guests, beating those who asked about what happened to missing kinsmen, and whipping parents who failed to deliver their daughters to be sexually abused.

In the fall of 1849 – and historical accounts differ about what, precisely, defined the tipping point for the beleaguered lakeside tribes – braves of the Hoolanapo clan decided they "might as well die one way as another," and planned an attack on Kelsey and Stone. Stories vary as to whether the final straw was Kulanapo Chief Augustine's wife being taken forcibly as a concubine, or the recent murder of a clansman, or the plan to drive elders and children to Sacramento, or the deaths of kinsmen in the gold fields, or the fear of retribution from a foiled cattle rustling attempt; whether preparations the night

before involved Chief Augustine's wife pouring water onto the pioneer's gun powder, or braves stealthily hiding their guns, or house slaves removing all the weaponry; whether Kelsey was dispatched with a spear, an arrow, or an arrow and a stone; or if Stone was brained with a rock or killed with a knife.

The sole indisputable fact is the killing and burying of the two abusers, after which the responsible braves, feeling "they had their liberty once more and were free men," quit the premises to join relatives around the lake.

Word of the killings spread from one pioneering settlement to another, and over the next two months groups of armed settlers brutalized, shot, or burnt every Native not otherwise claimed as a slave in nearby Napa and Sonoma valleys. Shortly thereafter, U.S. Army Lieutenant J.W. Davidson and Second Lieutenant George Stoneman, under the orders of Pacific Division General Persifor F. Smith led a dragoon company to "cut the Indians to pieces" for the murders.

The regiments found the sixty-eight square mile lake to be deserted, except for one community well out of rifle range. Reinforcements were ordered: Captain Nathaniel Lyon, the regional U.S. Cavalry regiment commander in Monterey, secured whale boats and cannons from San Francisco and mountain howitzers from Benicia, over one hundred miles away. Five days after departing Benicia, Captain Lyon's expedition joined Davidson and Stonemans' company detached to the western shore of the lake, forcing two Natives to guide them. As the dragoon proceeded, firing cannon into the brush and shooting tribes on sight, remaining clanspeople fled across the shallow spring waters to the northern lake corner, seeking refuge on Bonopoti island.

On May 15, 1850, before the regiment soldiers from the First Dragoon and local settlers attacked the island, Badonnopoti chief Ge-Wi-Lih approached the militiamen with his hands held up, to indicate peace. The soldiers responded by shooting. "The Indians, who, perceiving us once upon their island, took flight directly, plunging into the water, among the heavy growth of tula," recounted Captain Lyon. Unleashing the full force of their artillery, the regiment took no prisoners: clubbing, stabbing and gunning people down as they tried to swim away, pursuing villagers into the tule marsh. They killed ba-

bies by smashing their heads against tree trunks, and murdered children, and mothers holding infants, by slamming bayonets through their bodies and tossing them into the water. The rancheria and all food stores were burnt.

"The tula was thus thoroughly searched, with severe protracted efforts, and with most gratifying results," reported Lyon, claiming responsibility for sixty to one hundred kills.

The soldiers soldiered on: wiping out an entire village was insufficient retribution. After the Bonopoti island massacre, the militia murdered their guides (one shot, one hung) and proceeded to the Yohaiyak community, at least seventy-five souls, living over twenty miles away. Upon seeing the regiment, the Yohaiyak fled to a densely thicketed island in the middle of the Russian River, where it was impossible to mount an effective defense.

"The island soon became a perfect slaughter pen," according to Lyon.

It took the remaining tribes five days to gather the dead.

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One six-year-old girl survived the Bonopoti massacre. Her name was Ni'ka. She hid underwater, breathing through a tule reed straw until it grew dark.

When she emerged, the water was filled with blood, her people gone.

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Euphotic zone: a lake's well-lit surface waters containing the highest amount of dissolved oxygen and largest colonies of photosynthetic microorganisms (phytoplankton, algae, cyanobacteria) and zooplankton.

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Bonopoti is now referred to as Bloody Island. Ni'ka became Lucy. Knohtai was respelled as Konocti, the name of a major concert destination and hundred-acre resort that fell apart in the 1990s and was succeeded by a Pomo casino. Kabatin, possibly the oldest lake in North America, was renamed as Clear Lake; Lake County, now the most heavily burned county in the history of the United States (eight massive wildfires in seven years have scorched over fifty percent of the county's acreage), was named for the Lake.

Renowned for water sports including fishing, swimming, sailing, skiing, and motor-boating, Clear Lake – the largest freshwater lake in California named to the California List of Impaired Waterbodies – offers an equal number of water hazards.

In the 1940-50s, repeated applications of the persistent legacy pesticide dichlorodiphenyldichloroethane (DDD), a chemical cousin of DDT, to promote tourism by ridding the lake of the non-biting Clear Lake gnat, decimated Western Grebe flocks and inspired Rachel Carson's seminal text *Silent Spring*. Later discoveries of DDD measured at different levels in lake biota – 5 milligrams in algae, 50-330 milligrams in prey fish, and 2000-2500 milligrams in grebes and predatory fish – provided the first set of scientific data to demonstrate the newly coined term "bioaccumulation:" the aggregation of successively higher toxin concentrations in organisms occupying progressively higher levels in a food web.

Dichlorodiphenyldichloroethane remnants are merely one ingredient of Clear Lake's poisonous aquatic stew. Naturally high levels of phosphorus in lake floor sediment, combined with runoff from unfettered agricultural development and uncontained sewage cause cultural eutrophication: human-induced algal blooms that suffocate water bodies overloaded with nitrogen and phosphorus. Every summer harmful algal blooms (HABs) – including toxin-producing cyanobacteria (CyanoHABs) – lead to periodic closures around the lake to recreational and cultural uses.

Short-term human health effects from CyanoHAB toxins are similar to those of DDD and include dizziness, numbness, gastrointestinal and liver harm, hemorrhaging and dermatitis. Long-term impacts include liver failure, tumors, and cardiac arrest. At the lowest cautionary levels for HABs, the public, including pets and livestock, is advised to

avoid swimming or wading near lake algae or scum, to refrain from drinking lake water or using it for cooking or cleaning fish fillets, to avoid eating shellfish, and to safely dispose of fish guts.

After a series of toxic algal blooms in Clear Lake failed to inspire routine sampling by local public agencies, two tribal offices in the area, the environmental protection units of the Big Valley Band of Pomo Indians and the Elem Indian Colony, stepped up to lead water monitoring in the lake, prioritizing tule reed gathering sites, clamming sites, hook-and-reel fishing sites, and swimming and campground areas. Overwhelmed by the enormity and complexity of dangers impacting the lake, tribal staff scientists Sarah Ryan and Karola Kennedy founded the Clear Lake Cyanobacteria Task Force, an array of tribal, city, county, state, and federal agencies meeting to analyze lake nutrient, pollutant, and toxin levels, discuss ecotoxicology sampling results and associated field studies, and propose agency actions.

Now in its fifth year, the Task Force has set a model for related efforts throughout California, with follow-up from their meetings rippling through member agencies. Lake county government now includes water quality in their emergency response and hazard mitigation plans. Member agencies are developing more consistent and conservative guidelines for notifying users when public health thresholds are exceeded. Clear Lake water purveyors have purchased new water quality monitoring equipment as part of a California State Water Resources Control Board plan to heighten information sharing and networking among operators of the lake's seventeen surface water plants. The California State Environmental Protection Agency is conducting research at Clear Lake to develop diagnostic testing kits for health professionals, and other agencies are planning public health impact surveys to determine cyanotoxin exposure routes.

Yet monitoring for toxins is more problematic than searching for the proverbial needle in a haystack, because the haystack is constantly shifting and changing, with countless types of needles, including needles we have yet to identify or name. Not every species of cyanobacteria produces toxins known as "microcystins" or "cyanoginosins." Danger levels vary by cyanobacteria species, the science of differentiating cyanobacteria

species is still murky, and microcystins can occur even in the absence of algal blooms. In other words, to detect toxins, scientists must define exactly what they are looking for, even if it might be invisible or unknown. Through trial and error, Ryan and Kennedy's teams learned to perform specific water analyses for known toxins and discovered alarming results at "repeat offender" sites: summertime measurements at Clear Lake for microcystins reached 16,000 ppb (parts per billion) in 2014 and 10,000 ppb in 2015, dipped to extremely low levels after devastating wildfires in 2016-2017, then rose again to 4800 ppb in 2018. These levels are thousandfold increases above the designated risk threshold of 20 ppb.

Signage at Clear Lake about the presence of microcystins is voluntary, and "people in positions of power are often violently opposed," noted a local health official, referring to the fear of economic losses when signs go up and tourists avoid the lake. Yet with public outcry in 2013 when a dog apparently died from cyanotoxin exposure after swimming in Clear Lake, the Lake County Environmental Health Division began posting warning signs in popular swimming zones when the surface waters were coated with green slime and the death-like stench was impossible to ignore.

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Limnotic zone: the main body of the lake; open waters where light does not penetrate to the bottom.

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Ignorance breeds arrogance breeds theft. In 1855, riparian rights for Cache Creek, the primary waterway flowing from Clear Lake, were deeded to a neighboring county; over the next hundred years, almost two thousand wetland acres at the northern end of the lake were blocked off and reclaimed for agriculture, and nine streams flowing into the

lake were tapped to irrigate wineries and marijuana grows. With each successive climate-change induced drought, lake levels drop to new historic lows.

Beginning in the 1870s, settlers and California wildlife agencies, untutored in Clear Lake's native fish and discounting their importance to lake ecosystem balance, enthusiastically stocked the lake with eighteen species of non-native fish including carp, catfish, bluegill sunfish, brown bullhead, and black bass.[ii] With Clear Lake filled with predatory exotics, and streams that formerly sheltered migratory lake fish permanently diminished, boom and bust cycles in lake biology have pushed four species of culturally significant fish – species found nowhere else in the entire world – to extinction. A fifth endemic species, the Clear Lake hitch (*Lavinia exilicauda chi*), was listed as threatened in 2016 by the California Fish and Game Commission, the same agency that introduced the invasives in the first place.

Parallel to and congruent with the lake's other ecocides, mercury remains from California Historical Landmark Number 428, the now-defunct Sulphur Bank Mercury Mine (1856-1957), turned Clear Lake into the most mercury-polluted lake in the world,[iii] leaving behind a Superfund site adjacent to the homesteads of the Elem Indian Colony, one of seven federally-recognized tribes remaining in the area.

Mercury in water bodies eventually becomes mercury poisoning in other bodies. Anaerobic bacteria living in lake bottom sediments convert mercury to methylmercury, a bioavailable form of mercury absorbed into living cells six times more easily than inorganic mercury. Like DDD/DDT, mercury biomagnifies throughout the food web: ingested by aquatic phytoplankton, mercury exponentially increases in fatty tissues each time one creature eats another: from phytoplankton to zooplankton to small fish to medium-size fish to bigger fish to the oldest, largest carnivores: bass, catfish, hawks, bears, humans.

Fishers in the "Bass Capital of the West" are warned about consuming their catch, because bass from Clear Lake is more toxic than ocean tuna. According to the California Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment, bass is off the menu for women of childbearing age and kids, but catfish once a week is acceptable. For adults older than

forty-five, suggested servings are one portion of bass a week and no more than three of other predatory fish.[iv] Most Clear Lake fishers choose catch-and-release.

Tribes that were once entirely self-sufficient, subsiding on the lake's bounties, are now subjected to multiple research studies investigating their meager consumption of Clear Lake species. And each year, before holding tule boat races in association with their annual tule festival, Big Valley tribe tests the waters.

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Profundal or **benthic** zone: the deepest lake waters including the bottom sediment, the areas receiving the least amount of sunlight.

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The only recognizable remnant of Bonopoti island is located down a poorly maintained side road parallel to Lake County Road 20. Largely ignored and sundered from a lake whose current waters and geography would confound the Badonnopoti, a lumpy hillock bears an outdated plaque and a smattering of non-native grasses. The plaque, placed in 1942 by the oddly named "Native Sons of the Golden West," and graffitied with splashes of red paint, describes the acts of May 15, 1850 as a "battle." It is here that Ni'-ka's great-grandsons, Doug and Clayton Duncan, hold their annual Bloody Island Massacre Memorial ceremony.

The Memorial is held on a Saturday in late May, announced on Facebook, and open to anyone. Depending on who shows up, the ceremony includes traditional dancing and a sleepover the night before, a pre-dawn walk with singing, or a potluck breakfast catered by a motorcycle gang. Doug, who dreamed the ceremony fifteen years ago, leads the walk to the site with a clapper stick, its delicate wooden rattle barely louder than frogs sounding out from the marsh, a quiet insistence shaming snarling dogs shaking nearby

fences, echoing across pitted asphalt to surround the plaque on the rock, the call-it-a-battle-not-a-massacre plaque.

Clayton, in his current stage of living with cancer, stands next to his brother on the rock, welcomes everyone, and recounts a bit of Badonnopoti and rancheria history. He speaks of his great-grandmother's habit of going outside every morning and every evening, raising her palms up into the air "like she was holding the Creator's cheeks" and praying; how his mother invoked his grandmother as inspiration for why Clayton needed to put aside his anger and desire for revenge, to choose forgiveness instead of bitterness.

As the sun rises behind the Duncans, other people speak up, sing, or read poems. An elder from another tribe describes Native ancestors lying in cardboard boxes and locked up in museums, burial grounds paved over by shopping malls and swimming pools, three hundred and eighty-nine broken treaties. He exhorts us to work together to protect sacred sites.

Ten minute's walk from the Bonopoti hillock lies California Historical Landmark Number 427, just beyond the town of Upper Lake, along the county highway between the Running Creek and Robinson Rancheria casinos. The plaque, installed in 2005 by the California Department of Parks and Recreation and Department of Transportation in cooperation with the Lucy Moore Foundation, briefly summarizes the Bloody Island massacre of "nearly the entire native population of the island" in less than a hundred words.

It took a century and a half to acknowledge the genocide; sixty-three years to spell m-a-s-s-a-c-r-e instead of b-a-t-t-l-e. But the original 1942 plaque on the hillock remains firmly in place, and Kelsey and Stone have their own monument on the opposite side of the lake, California Historical Marker Number 426. The marker, acknowledging the house was "constructed by forced Indian labor, causing much resentment and culminating in murder," memorializes the decedents' graves beneath the ruins of their adobe home; ruins located alongside Kelsey creek, just outside of the town of Kelseyville.

Each year, some kind soul launches a petition to change the town's name.

None of the efforts have been successful.

Yet.

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[i] Twentieth-century ethnographers coined the term "pomo" from a related word meaning "red earth," and erroneously applied it to countless tribal bands in Mendocino, Lake, and Sonoma counties, Northern California.

[ii] Lisa C. Thompson, Gregory A. Giusti, Kristina L. Weber, and Ryan F. Keiffer. 2013. The native and introduced fishes of Clear Lake: a review of the past to assist with decisions of the future. *California Fish and Game* 99(1):7-41.

[iii] Although mercury can also leach naturally from soils, all of Clear Lake's mercury are traced to the former mine. "Mercury Mysteries Cross-discipline UC Davis Team Studies Clear Lake," by Susan Rockwell, UC Davis *University News,* February 4, 2000. https://www.ucdavis.edu/news/mercury-mysteries-cross-discipline-uc-davis-team-studies-clear-lake

[iv] The truth about mercury in Clear Lake's fishery, *Sacramento Record Bee*, April 5, 2016, http://www.record-bee.com/article/NQ/20160405/SPORTS/160409927