

Pestilence and Persistence: Yosemite Indian Demography and Culture in Colonial California

Kathleen Hull

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In recent years, research into indigenous and colonial engagements in California has matured, with a series of major monographs focusing on different historical periods and themes and influencing researchers not only in California, but those working in many other parts of the globe. Scholars such as Hackel, Lightfoot, Milliken, Silliman, Voss and others have produced excellent case studies covering a variety of perspectives, including the effect of colonial institutions, indigenous agency, indigenous labor, and the process of ethnogenesis. These books have elevated the anthropology and archaeology of colonial California to the forefront of such studies worldwide, largely by delving in data-rich coastal areas well within the Spanish and Mexican colonial settlement sphere.

Hull's welcome contribution expands on these studies by moving inland to the Yosemite region of the Sierra Nevada, where she sets out to gauge colonial influences amongst indigenous populations, here in the form of introduced pathogens. Importantly, Hull sets out to examine indigenous responses to diseases in a region at the periphery of direct contact. With limited (but important) ethnohistorical sources to draw upon, you would be wrong to think that there is a dearth of data in this study, even if it is removed from the 'gaze' of the Mission and Presidio zone. Archaeology is key to coming to grips with the history of people who were not directly documented by Spanish and Mexican colonialists. Hull's exhaustive and original research illustrates the importance of the archaeological record in teasing out indigenous demographics in the hinterlands. Simply put, this book is a superb example of historical archaeology at its data-rich best. Specifically, Hull delves deep into

different methodological and theoretical approaches to indigenous demographics, and discusses the variety of Native American strategies employed in dealing with introduced diseases.

The book opens with a brief but wide ranging chapter (*Disentangling Colonial Encounters*) on pandemics and the effects of disease, colonial encounters in California, and an overview of the structure of the book. She outlines the core principle of her study—that the Yosemite Indian story is one of introduced disease, depopulation, adjustment, and subsequent cultural persistence. Chapter 2 (*Multiple Perspectives on Critical Time*) is another brief but astute overview that examines the types of data available in the study area, including oral histories, historical narratives, personal memoirs, ethnographic accounts, dendrochronological information, and archaeological data. This chapter is followed in Chapter 3 (*Colonial Encounters in Yosemite Valley*) by a narrative of the historical events in the American Period and the consequences for the native Yosemite people, the Awahnichi. Here, crucial Awahnichi oral history is reviewed, which suggests that the group had already suffered a 'black sickness' before Euro-American contact and that a flexible strategy was employed to deal with it. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 (*The People of Awahnee, Peopling the Past*, and *A Tradition of Survival: Archaeological Evidence for Awahnichi Depopulation*) are at the very core of Hull's archaeological approach. She sets out in detail the proxy evidence for changes in population size from prehistory up through the late nineteenth century. This is carefully argued material: Hull (and the editors at University of California Press) should be applauded for not cutting corners here. This is dense material—meticulously presented—which will not appeal to the generalist or the casually interested reader. But, for those like Hull who take seriously the archaeological record of the historical period and its potential to inform us beyond the textual evidence, this is rich and rewarding scholarly research. Much of Hull's argument is based upon extensive excavations, field sampling strategies, and the results from a program of obsidian hydration dating that resulted in 2,978 dates from debitage specimens recovered in those excavations (p. 128). Hull argues that the dates can be subdivided by 50-year increments, allowing a proxy measurement of site occupancy and population. Her statistics show long-term diachronic

trends with intriguing peaks and troughs, including a decline between A.D. 1750 and 1800 that corresponds to the suggested date of the ‘black sickness’. Importantly, the data also provide evidence that other demographic changes occurred in the deeper past, and that (like those before) the more recent decline was followed by a population rebound immediately prior to the American Period (and the subsequent even more drastic effects of the Gold Rush). The next chapter (*Hol’-low and He-le’-jah*) details further archaeological evidence for what Hull terms ‘cultural persistence’: here, the chapter focuses on daily practices seen in the archaeological record before and after the ‘black sickness’ and shows that only the ‘subtleties of changes in daily life’ (p. 218) can be detected. Hull suggests that, all-in-all, the data are consistent with the idea that depopulation due to disease occurred in Yosemite prior to face-to-face Awahnichi/European contact, but that there was an adjustment to those circumstances with resultant cultural continuity despite the apparent significant demographic collapse (p. 219).

In Chapter 9 (*The Colonial Experience: Epidemics, Disease and Cultural Outcomes Elsewhere in North America*), the book shifts gears to present ten case studies from across North America and explore other possible, similar scenarios of Native depopulation before direct contact. I understand that there was a need to put the Yosemite case study in a broader context, but a more synthetic approach—rather than this rather detailed series of examples—would have been more interesting from my point of view. The book finishes in Chapter 10 (*Culture, History and Colonization*) with a well constructed summation, and it is here that Hull is at her best, utilizing the example of Yosemite to engage a number of salient issues in the archaeology of

colonialism. There are many important issues touched on here which will have lasting relevance. For instance, Hull succinctly shows how the strategies of survival in colonial contexts can transcend simplistic models of creolization, and persuasively highlights the important role that charismatic individuals can play in such difficult situations.

While the book contains adequate maps and graphs, it is remarkably short of images. There is little that gives a sense of Yosemite as a place, a real shame for those readers who have never visited it; likewise, there are no photographs of the sites where excavations occurred, the artifacts, or the source of the obsidian. Also, it is important to point out that obsidian is absolutely key to the argument put forward; Hull argues convincingly that a 50-year interval can be observed within the extensive hydration dating scheme. This is a significant proposition which should spark debate on the overall accuracy of the interpretations derived from the obsidian data from Yosemite.

Overall, it cannot be doubted that Hull’s work here is superlative. This book marks a watershed in the colonial archaeology of hinterland communities, and it should be read by historical archaeologists everywhere. Likewise, Great Basin and California prehistorians should read this book, because Hull’s research illustrates what Kent Lightfoot has previously suggested—that no neat divide exists between prehistory and history when it comes to the archaeology of Native Americans. Finally, this book illustrates the immense value of research within interior landscapes and away from the coastal regions where so many researchers do their work, and it once again shows how the archaeology of California can resonate beyond its own boundaries.

