

Special Issue

Healing in the damage: Towards novel perspectives on
human-environment entanglements in the Americas

Recognition, healing, and co-stewardship:
The case of landless tribes and conservation in California

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Abstract

We develop the notion of “justice as healing” and draw on the concept of “recognition”, with its internal and external dimensions, to forge pathways towards healthier relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. Our analysis is rooted in the case of the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band of California (AMTB) – a non-federally recognised Indigenous Tribe that has experienced successive phases of genocide and assimilation by colonial powers of Spain, Russia, Mexico, and the United States. Combining qualitative research methods with Indigenous political theory, we present an environmental narrative of the AMTB that emphasises the ways the Tribe has resisted cultural assimilation and resource extraction since the late 1880s. We argue that recognition, together with Indigenous strategic engagement and coalition-building with settler entities, are important components to the healing journeys of Indigenous peoples in the United States, Latin America, and globally. *Keywords:* recognition, healing; Indigenous peoples; Amah Mutsun, California.

Resumen: Reconocimiento, sanación y gestión conjunta: El caso de las tribus sin tierras y la conservación en California

En este artículo desarrollamos la noción de “justicia como sanación” y recurrimos al concepto de “reconocimiento”, junto con sus dimensiones internas y externas, para trazar caminos hacia relaciones más saludables entre comunidades indígenas y no indígenas. Basamos nuestro análisis en el caso de la Amah Mutsun Tribal Band de California (AMTB), un grupo indígena no reconocido a nivel federal que ha experimentado sucesivas fases de genocidio y asimilación por parte de los poderes coloniales de España, Rusia, México y Estados Unidos. Combinamos métodos de investigación cualitativa con la teoría política indígena para presentar una narrativa ambiental de la AMTB que enfatiza las formas en que la tribu ha resistido la asimilación cultural y la extracción de recursos desde finales de la década de 1880 hasta la actualidad. Sostenemos que el reconocimiento, junto con la participación estratégica de los pueblos indígenas y la formación de alianzas con entidades colonizadoras, son componentes importantes

en los procesos de sanación de los pueblos indígenas en Estados Unidos, América Latina y a nivel global. *Palabras clave*: reconocimiento, sanación, pueblos indígenas, Amah Mutsun, California.

Introduction

The concept of “healing” has been used as an analytic in Indigenous-state relations literature to forefront Indigenous perseverance and survivance while centring the re-emergence of dormant practices and knowledge systems (McCaslin, 2005; Middleton, 2010; Million, 2013; Ross, 2014; Introduction to special issue). This concept is becoming increasingly important as the mistreatment of Indigenous peoples, at the hands of state institutions, gains global attention and the need for acknowledgement of these historical “wrongs” becomes ever more pressing. It is also rising in importance due to the emerging interest in recognition politics with specific connection to non-federally recognised Tribes of California who are Indigenous communities whose formal status was terminated by the United States government in the 1920s. Drawing on Tuck (2009), we employ a “healing” framework to suspend damage-centred narratives of marginalised communities and to re-envision research in ways that is hopeful, useful, consent-driven, and liberatory. In this paper, we weave connections among recognition justice, healing, and co-stewardship in conservation contexts, while linking the notion of recognition in the Americas to the experiences of Native peoples in California. It acknowledges the ongoing harm and violence against Indigenous peoples by dominant settler-colonial institutions and argues for the dual processes of healing on behalf of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples by providing empirical evidence rooted in our work with the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band (AMTB), which is a non-federally recognised Tribe of California. We argue for “justice as healing” – a concept that has not been fully developed in environmental research on Indigenous communities thus far. Justice as healing is a holistic concept that emphasises the spiritual and emotional elements of being in good relation with oneself, with others, and with the natural world. It is facilitated by the dual processes of internal and external recognition, which validate personal experiences and acknowledge past harms (Johnson & Sigona, 2022). We draw inspiration from existing work on environmental justice and Indigenous justice to further build this idea. Although we agree that distributive, procedural, and recognitional elements are essential to environmental justice (Schlosberg, 2007), this framework fails to meet the needs of Indigenous peoples because it does not reconfigure the structures that reinforce their systemic domination. Further, when it comes to work on Indigenous justice and the related body of work on recognition politics, we appreciate how scholars have exposed the subtle ways colonial dominance has continued under the guise of new state-sponsored programs of reconciliation and truth commissions; however, we are uncomfortable with the often zero-sum interpretations that accompany critiques of Indigenous communities’ engagements with state structures. In these

instances, “true” justice is seen as possible only outside these mechanisms, such as through radical organising. We see this as a missed opportunity that not only dismisses the agency of Indigenous people but also ignores the Tribal sovereignty underpinning such actions. Instead, our research highlights strategic engagement and coalition-building where the AMTB has worked alongside, and sometimes in tension with, government agencies, private organisations, and external academics to achieve land access, restore dormant knowledge systems, and attain conservation goals. This engagement is not a misguided manifestation of co-option, but rather proof of the enduring, continuous, and creative ways Californian Indigenous peoples have struggled against, and persisted through, colonial domination and disruption.

The paper is structured as follows. The first section presents information on “recognition” in the Americas and focuses on its political and constitutional forms. Next, the paper delves into the theoretical concept of recognition and its dual processes, which acknowledge (internal) self-worth, distinctness, and pain, and (external) state-driven trauma, violence, and accountability. We link this to the notion of “healing” to build a more affective, relational, and mutually dependent framework for thinking about health, well-being, and relationships with human and non-human beings. Then, we present a brief history of the colonial experience of Californian Indigenous peoples and provide information on the AMTB of California. Finally, we support our conceptual findings with empirical evidence from research engagements with the AMTB. We demonstrate how the Tribe is overcoming its separation from land and culture by engaging in strategic co-stewardship arrangements with state agencies and external experts, as well as effective radical social mobilisation efforts.

Recognition of Indigenous peoples in the Americas

The topic of recognition of Indigenous peoples across the Americas is complex, with extensive research examining how “indigeneity” is defined and how rights have been integrated (or not) into legal texts and constitutions. Fuentes and Fernandez (2022) argue that globally, formal recognition of Indigenous peoples by national governments has been given in areas of territory, socio-culture, and politics to varying degrees. These categories represent the major spheres where Indigenous peoples have experienced successes and challenges due to the acceptance or denial of difference over time. To understand recognition in constitutional contexts, Fuentes and Fernandez identify three forms which have characterised recognition in Indigenous-state relations throughout recent history.

First, a denial of recognition is an often violent and necessary component in the creation of a common nation. As Wade (2007) discusses, nation-building seeks to achieve the goal of a homogeneous citizenry, in which everyone shares the same citizenship and history, and it is this shared identity and “oneness” that bind people together. At the same time, “others” are excluded or oppressed. For Indigenous peoples in the Americas, the denial of recognition, driven by a

colonial imperative, can be found in state-sponsored campaigns used to physically eliminate. For example, in the late 1800s, the US government established bounties to incentivise the mass killing of Indigenous people and thus reduce their population (Norton, 1979; Risling Baldy, 2018; Rizzo-Martinez, 2022). In both the United States and Canada, the Tribal and residential school systems sought to “remove the Indian out of the person” by separating young people from their families and forcing them to learn English and forget their family names and histories (MacDonald et al., 2012). Less violent but just as effective, assimilationist policies can be considered a “friendlier form” of recognition denial in that they seek to integrate Indigenous peoples by granting them political, social, and economic rights not tied to their cultural identities but rather to their economic or productive homogeneity. In the 1950s and 1960s, Latin American agrarian reform policies granted Indigenous peoples rights as peasants, and several ratified international policies advanced integrationist policies which sought to include Indigenous peoples by providing education, training, and economic assistance (Merino, 2018). In these instances, Indigenous identity as a category was eliminated in favour of one grounded in modernity.

Second, multiculturalism emerged in response to years of exclusion and emerging efforts of Indigenous activism and struggles for representation and autonomy. Particularly in Latin America, in the 1990s and 2000s, notions of “Indigenous sovereignty” and self-determination gained support through the creation of global human rights frameworks and international declarations recognising Indigenous rights (such as ILO Convention 169 and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples of 2007). New constitutional reforms and legal texts recognised Indigenous peoples and their collective rights, including those tied to land, customary law, and language. Canada and the United States have largely moved toward a multicultural society, as demonstrated by valuing diversity and difference. However, multiculturalism values the co-existence of diverse cultures and identities; it does not advance a reconfiguration of structures of power and domination (Ponzanesi, 2007). For this reason, as Fierro (2020, p. 2759) states, constitutional multiculturalism has “been largely symbolic and [has] not translated into a tangible improvement in the living conditions of [I]ndigenous peoples”.

Plurinationalism is the third form of recognition, and its manifestations are found mainly in Latin America. It calls for a radical change in terms of social, economic, and political power and governing structures. According to Walsh (2008, p. 143), “The importance of plurinationalism is its rethinking and re-founding of what is uni-national, colonial, and exclusive within a project of the state and society built on the basis of plurality and ancestral difference”. Governments in Ecuador and Bolivia, who were voted in largely by Indigenous supporters in the 2000s, worked to integrate notions of plurinationalism into their governing structures and approaches. Following the notion of “buen vivir”, governments entrenched rights of nature and Indigenous peoples into constitutions while also pursuing resource nationalisation policies and poverty alleviation

initiatives. While some social and environmental advancements have been made, governmental efforts have largely co-opted plurinational ideas as many authorities remain antagonistic towards Indigenous peoples and their constitutional rights are frequently disregarded (Anthias, 2022; Coletta & Raftopoulos, 2021; Ranta, 2020).

The above three forms of recognition position political and constitutional recognition as major factors in Indigenous-state relations. While important, these forms gloss over the affective aspects of recognition and the reciprocal relations which may forge improved Indigenous-state dynamics. Further, they say little about the mutual, bidirectional processes of recognition that may reconfigure uneven power relations and colonial ways of thinking and, importantly, establish a foundation for mutual healing.

Recognition and healing

We understand “recognition” as the acknowledgement of “a person’s understanding of who they are, of their fundamental characteristics as a human being” (Taylor, 1994, p. 24). Following Taylor, recognition of one’s personal worth, individual experiences, feelings, and history by oneself and by others is key to living a life of truth and authenticity. Many Indigenous peoples struggle with this form of recognition due to colonial governing structures and widespread societal discrimination against Native Peoples. In her book, *As We Have Always Done*, Nishnaabeg scholar Simpson (2017) uses the term “reciprocal recognition” to describe how recognising one’s own light and the light of others can generate power and lead to better relations with one’s self and with others. She writes, “Recognition for us is about presence, about profound listening, and about recognising and affirming the light in each other and as a mechanism for nurturing and strengthening internal relationships in our Nishnaabeg Worlds” (p. 182). She states that the reciprocity of recognition “forms the basis of positive identity, self-worth, and dignity” and “contributes to strong individuals and families”. Applied to a broader context, this form of recognition, which “is reciprocal, continual, and a way of generating society” (p. 185) is key to forming connection and interdependence with one’s self and with others.

This dual interpretation of recognition is essential to healing the past traumas of Indigenous communities, and to forging positive pathways of the future. As Middleton (2010, p.11) states, healing is the “conscious and holistic recovery, recognition, and rebuilding within Native individuals, families, communities, and nations” after years of spiritual, ecological, and familial trauma. Healing is facilitated by the concept of recognition’s external and internal dimensions, which are based on Fanon’s (1952/2008) dual processes of colonisation. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon brings attention to physical and psychological terrains on which colonisation was imposed. Colonial domination, he argued, was made possible through the material (external) structures of assimilation and was further reinforced by the psychological (internal) effects of prejudices of colonisers.

As a result, the self-perception of Black (colonised) individuals was diminished and shaped by alienation and dehumanisation. Building on this understanding, we argue that healing is an outcome of the psychological (internal) recognition of one's self-worth, familial bonds, history, cultural traditions, and the community's acknowledgement of past traumas. At the same time, healing is facilitated by the (external) recognition from institutions of the painful experiences of Indigenous peoples, and the acknowledgement of their role in activating violence against them. This understanding of healing is relational, reciprocal, and mutually dependent (see Johnson & Sigona, 2022).

The interpretation of healing as a set of dual processes rooted in recognition that places the responsibility of healing and its facilitation on both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities runs in tension with the opinions of several recognition politics scholars who assert that any recognition by state bodies equates to the reassertion of colonial power and the continued domination of Indigenous subjects (see Álvarez & Coolsaet, 2020; Coulthard, 2014). In *Red Skin, White Masks*, Dene scholar Coulthard (2014) examines and strongly criticises the recognition movement involving Canada's government and its Indigenous population. He argues that the Canadian government has long cast violence against First Nations, Metis, and Inuit peoples through colonising actions, and this violence continues more subtly under the guise of current "reconciliation" efforts. These efforts, which attempt to "right the wrongs" of the past through the delegation of things like land, capital, and power from the state to Indigenous communities, ultimately, "reproduce the very configurations of colonialist, racist, patriarchal state power that Indigenous peoples have sought to transcend" (Coulthard, 2014, p. 3). Writing in a similar vein and also from an Indigenous perspective, Simpson (2017, p. 181) asks the poignant question: "Why do we continually seek recognition from Canada when we know it never ends well?"

Both Coulthard and Simpson's critical remarks are sharp reminders of the mistreatment of Native peoples across the Americas as perpetrated by governments. Their work also points to the continuation of colonial domination through persisting political and economic structures, and the ways critical perspectives can be co-opted by liberal recognition-based initiatives. Finally, they remind us that Indigenous autonomy and sovereignty do not exist only because the state says they do; they exist before and outside state mechanisms. While we fully support these critical points, we argue the authors do not fully consider the multitude of reasons driving Native communities' engagement with state actors, as their assessments are mainly based on the experiences of Indigenous communities who already have federal status. Furthermore, we find the authors gloss over the self-affirming power of persistence expressed by Native communities as they simultaneously negotiate *and* resist state structures.

In identifying these tensions, we note the difficulties in mapping recognition scholar critiques onto the realities of Californian Indigenous peoples. We unpack these complexities further along two lines. First, we acknowledge the structural perpetuation of colonial power through state recognition as put forth by

Coulthard (2014); however, we note state recognition is often desired by non-federally recognised Tribes because of the material outcomes it affords them vis-à-vis long-standing political and economic challenges. Chilcote (2024, p. 30), a scholar from the non-recognised San Luis Rey Band of Mission Indians, explains, “the pros of federal recognition outweigh the cons for unrecogni[s]ed [T]ribes with few options for addressing the hardships and contemporary struggles they face. How federal recognition influences peoples’ lives cannot be understated, and it is critical to understand why unrecognised [T]ribes go through the available channels to gain federal acknowledgement for their [T]ribal communities”. Chilcote’s point underscores the experiences of Native communities’ reasons behind their willingness to engage in state structures despite the limitations and constraints of the opportunities they provide. Second, as non-federally recognised Tribes engage in state processes to gain economic or political rights, many also enact multi-dimensional strategies that push back against and resist state domination. This is important to highlight. These actions and their complexities, which we describe below, demonstrate how Native communities function within state spaces while maintaining their authority and autonomy. They also show how the existence and continuity of Tribes is not dependent on the federal acknowledgement process but rather on the Tribe’s collective efforts to revive and conserve their culture.

Indigenous scholars who critique recognition by the state in the manner above are often those from Indigenous communities that already have federal recognition and are therefore in a unique, and perhaps politically powerful, position to reject it. Our work is concerned with Native communities who problematise federal recognition as Tribes who do not have the option to readily attain it in the first place. This difference in starting points explains the AMTB’s engagements with state actors, which may seem contradictory but are always strategic and continuously evolving. While the Tribe has maintained an active petition for federal recognition since 1990 (petition #120) and has Most Likely Descendant designation at the California state level, in recent years, the AMTB’s current focus has shifted away from acquiring federal standing to being more about gaining informal recognition through reciprocal relationships or institutional apologies from a diverse set of actors. By decentering formal state recognition in their work, the AMTB pursues projects whose goals are rooted in establishing environmental and place-based connections. In this way, mutual recognition, which establishes a foundation for healing, helps build coalitions across different scales and support bases, enabling the Tribe to gain access to resources essential to their spiritual, cultural, and political longevity.

Based on our research with the AMTB, we show examples where the Tribe has worked together in conservation arrangements to co-steward land alongside government actors as well as with non-Indigenous academics. We are inspired by the AMTB’s Chairman, Valentine Lopez, who often says that, “in a relationship, both parties need to be healthy” (interview, 2022). This statement underscores the mutual responsibilities of healing; it prompts Native communities to

see the light in their fellow members and build stronger bonds with themselves and relatives. It also prompts members of broader society and the institutions that represent them to acknowledge past and ongoing instances of dispossession and socio-environmental injustices against Indigenous communities while encouraging the cultivation of new, decolonised conditions and projects on which the futurities of Indigenous peoples can take root and grow.

Methodological approach

Our research emerges out of long-term engagements with the AMTB (see Johnson & Sigona, 2022; Sigona & Johnson, in Press). It is guided by an interest in how relationships of trust and reciprocity between public and private actors and Indigenous communities can lead to positive environmental outcomes. Sigona is a member of the AMTB and is active in advocating for the Tribe and managing the AMTB's non-profit conservation organisation (detailed below). He recently completed his PhD dissertation from which some of our findings derive. Johnson is a settler geographer and an ally who has worked with the Tribe on an academic, educational, and advocacy basis since 2019. Between 2019 and 2024, both authors employed Indigenous methodologies (Smith, 1999/2012) and qualitative methods to understand the Tribe's efforts to revitalise connections to land, plants, and one another. We conducted in-person and online interviews with Chairman Lopez, as well as several Tribal elders and knowledge-holders. We also interviewed representatives from major public agencies, private organisations, and academic institutions who actively engage with the Tribe on issues relating to conservation management, land access, planting and harvesting of medicinal plants, and fire use and education. Lastly, we visited public and private lands with ancestral significance to the Tribe, attended Tribal-state signings of memoranda of understanding, and engaged in fire trainings and physical environmental work with Tribal members and non-Tribal experts.

California native Peoples and colonial encounters

Indigenous land dispossession by European colonisers was initially justified by the concept of *terra nullius*, which translates as “empty” or “unoccupied”. This categorisation of Indigenous-occupied land by the Spanish upon their arrival to the Americas in the fifteenth century comes from the Doctrine of Discovery, which was a series of Catholic papal bulls published in 1493 (Avalos, 2024). *Inter Caetera* states that all lands occupied by non-Christians are free to be seized by Europeans because Indigenous peoples are not Christians and are incapable of possessing land (Moreton-Robinson, 2015). This proclamation has been widely understood as racist since it failed to acknowledge Indigenous land tenure relationships (Moreton-Robinson, 2015), including documented Native American agricultural cultivation (Cronon, 1995) and anthropogenic burning practices (Anderson, 2005) lasting at least 12,000 years (Kimmerer, 2013). The

Doctrine of Discovery set the stage for Native removal and the categorisation of Indigenous peoples as domestic dependents under US government control (Avalos, 2024).

In California, colonial impacts varied widely among the diverse Tribes that comprise the state today. Tribal nations experienced colonial incursions from Spain, Russia, Mexico and then the United States. These successive colonial powers each brought their own ideas about natural resource extraction and perspectives of Indigenous assimilation. For example, after the arrival of the Spanish in Alta California in 1769, Catholic missions were established by Franciscan priests as a cheap means of occupying territory and managing land. Between 1776 and 1823, 21 missions were established from what is now San Diego to Sonoma (Akins & Bauer, 2021). The missions had gardens and fields used for agriculture, and all labour used to build the missions and run them was violently extracted from Indigenous peoples. As Akins (Round Valley Indian Tribe) and Bauer (2021) note, the missions were run according to the principle of “reduction”, whereby Native peoples were physically moved to the missions (away from their families and communities) for the priests to “save their souls” from sinful behaviours through baptism. The Amah Mutsun were moved to Mission San Juan Bautista and began living as workers and converts. Approximately 3,000 Amah Mutsun members were forcefully moved to the mission between 1797 and 1834 (Hart, 2003). The Spanish occupation actualised a “dual revolution” for the Indigenous population of the missions (Hackel, 2017) with devastating outcomes. The environmental landscape was significantly altered by the massive clearing of land and the farming of plants and animals. Indigenous peoples were subjected to horrific abuse and violence, which depleted their populations. Between 1769 and 1800, the total number of Indigenous peoples in coastal California declined by nearly 50 per cent (Hackel, 2017).

Following Mexico’s war of independence in 1821, concerns emerged concerning the secularisation of the missions, the breaking up of land, and the emancipation of Indigenous peoples. Rizzo-Martinez (2022) writes that although some land was divided up among newly freed Indigenous individuals, most of the land was granted to the local Californio (Spanish-Mexican) community. Racial hierarchies were further entrenched, and the Native population remained largely subordinate to colonising powers (who were now Mexican authorities). To make a living, male Native peoples often took up labour positions on Mexican-owned ranchos while women and children worked as domestic servants for wealthy Mexican families (Rizzo-Martinez, 2022). Severe mistreatment continued, and those caught attempting to run away from ranchos were killed (Hart, 2003).

Upon acquiring Alta California in 1848 via the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the United States, in 1851, elected to negotiate 18 treaties with Californian Tribal nations – 4 of which involved Mutsun territory – that would cede 75 million acres of Indigenous lands to the United States government in exchange for over 8 million acres of land that would be set aside for Tribal reservations (Hart,

2003). Not all Indigenous peoples in the region, however, were included in the negotiations. Assimilationist ideology and goals to further entrench Natives into the colonial economic system determined who participated in the treaty process (Lavery, 2003). Native peoples deemed “tame” and “Christian” were considered domesticated and under control and were excluded from the treaty negotiations, while those who were seen as “wild Indians” – natives who were not missionised and who presented a challenge to economic integration – were included. Although there are differing accounts on whether Amah Mutsun members signed the treaties, rejected their intent, or were party to the process (Hart, 2003; Amah Mutsun Tribal Band, 2020), what is clear is that the treaty process systematically disenfranchised the Tribe by dispossessing it of its land. This is because the United States ultimately did not ratify the treaties or acknowledge alternative Tribal demands, and instead, it secured all 75 million acres for its own purposes

At the turn of the twentieth century, concern for the welfare of Californian Natives increased, and attention was directed towards purchasing territory for landless Tribes (Lavery, 2003). However, the 1920s proved to be a complex and contradictory time concerning Indigenous visibility and formal recognition. On the one hand, Alfred Kroeber, a prominent scholar of Californian Native Anthropology, declared all “Coastanoan” Tribes – those located in central coastal California – to be “extinct” (Kroeber, 1925). On the other hand, however, anthropologist J.P. Harrington carried out meticulous linguistic and cultural documentation of these very Tribes deemed extinct to understand their histories and languages. Despite this important work, the extinction narrative continued to influence academia and policy decisions and was reaffirmed by the work of federal agent L.A. Dorrington, who was tasked with assessing the land needs of Californian Tribes through data collection and site visits. Dorrington did not follow through with any of the Tribal visits, yet he firmly concluded that a significant number of the region’s Tribes had no need for land. As a result, in 1927, 135 Californian Tribes, including the AMTB, lost their federal recognition and accompanying governmental administrative responsibility (Lavery, 2003).

At the time of this termination, coalitions of California Natives and white allies continued to exert pressure on the United States government to adjudicate Californian Native claims concerning the 18 unratified treaties of 1851 and 1852 (Gomez, 2024). These efforts led to the Californian Indian Jurisdictional Act (1928), which aimed to compensate Native communities alive at the time of the original act (1928) and those with ancestors living in California who may have been affected by the treaties (Hart, 2003). Following the creation of a California Indian Enrolment Census and a 26-year litigation process, Amah Mutsun Tribal members – who were previously documented as the San Juan Band in federal records – and other Tribes were each awarded \$150 in compensation in 1955 (Hart, 2003).

California’s distinct colonial history makes it virtually impossible for Tribes like the AMTB to regain federal recognition today. The federal

acknowledgement process is a highly contradictory and paradoxical maelstrom that omits the conditions of colonialism and settler colonialism that drive groups to seek it out in the first place (Barron, 2014). Tribes must meet mandatory criteria, for example, proof of continuous existence as an American Indian entity since 1900, which, for many Californian Tribes, is extremely difficult to demonstrate given the state's history of genocide and missionization, unratified treaties, and federal neglect (Chilcote, 2024; Gomez, 2024). Focusing away from the federal recognition process, the AMTB has centred their recent efforts on receiving formal apologies from non-state institutions active in the historical subjugation of Californian Tribes. After years of pressure from Chairman Lopez, in 2012, Bishop Richard Garcia of the Monterey Catholic Diocese held a Mass of Reconciliation to formally apologise for the Church's historical role in the violence perpetrated against the Tribe. In response to the apology, Chairman Lopez stated, "We view this Mass of Reconciliation as a very important step along the path of healing for Amah Mutsun, both individually, as many of our citizens are Catholic to this day, and collectively as a people, accepting our past, celebrating our resilience and looking to a vibrant future" (Amah Mutsun Tribal Band, 2012). While the apology was not made on behalf of the entire Catholic Church, nor did it take responsibility for ongoing harms as tied to the institution, the Bishop's apology represents a form of recognition that validates the Tribe's experiences of pain and suffering while demonstrating some accountability for past actions. In this way, the Tribe may begin on a path to re-establish community relations and systems of responsibilities to ensure their community collectively continues and flourishes.

Healing through co-stewardship

The major argument of this paper is that healing is a form of justice anchored in the concept of recognition. Here, we provide empirical examples of what recognition looks like from different vantage points. By describing three projects and initiatives the Tribe is involved in, we underscore the ways the ATMB has strategically built coalitions with state and academic actors to advance rights-based conservation to support its own healing. At the same time, the Tribal members work outside of these structures to actualise the socio-environmental futures they want. Because the Tribe is not federally recognised, they do not have any legal grounds to make formal claims to environmental or water resources. Therefore, these tactical strategies are essential to countering the long-term effects of colonialism and envisioning Indigenous community-centred possibilities of the present and future.

Many federal and local resource management agencies that own land in what is the AMTB's ancestral territory have granted the Tribe environmental recognition, which acknowledges the Tribe as a distinct entity with different ontological perspectives of land, based on responsibility, reciprocity, and healing. They recognise the value of Indigenous knowledge systems and practices to facilitate

greater biodiversity, enhanced propagation of Indigenous species, and reduced risks of catastrophic wildfires. This form of recognition has led to environmental *co-stewardship* arrangements, which are different from *co-management*, through which the Tribe is able to access land but also to carry out tending responsibilities by entering partnerships with major conservation actors (Sigona & Johnson, In Press). Briefly, co-management refers to the sharing of power in decision-making practices. It is a term that has formal legal standing in conservation discussions at the state-level and refers to government-to-government agreements. Co-stewardship refers to the involvement of an actor (in this case, the AMTB) in environmental management practices without the requirement of them taking full responsibility for it. The designation of the AMTB as co-stewards in conservation projects is an appropriate title because the Tribe does not have the resources nor the people-power to manage expansive landscapes on their own (interview, 2023). These conservation partnerships are an important way for trust and reciprocity to grow between Indigenous communities and their non-Indigenous counterparts.

The Amah Mutsun native stewardship corps and ecological restoration

One way the AMTB is initiating healing processes with the land and with one another is by establishing the Amah Mutsun Land Trust (AMLT), which is a Tribally-led NGO, and the Native Stewardship Corps (NSC) in 2015. The NSC is a group of adult and young-adult Tribal members who conduct on-the-ground natural and cultural resource management. The group's objective is to revitalise and restore Indigenous knowledge and culture by teaching and sharing traditional skills focused on native plant regeneration, the introduction of culturally significant species, and crafting and language arts. The NSC tends landscapes managed by partners, such as California State Parks, and its work often involves side-by-side stewardship and knowledge exchange.

At the Quiroste Valley Cultural Preserve in central California, the NSC fulfils Tribal objectives to restore grassland conditions to the state they were during first Spanish contact. Due to centuries of mismanagement, the former coastal prairie that was maintained by Tribal ancestors over centuries has succumbed to woody plant encroachment by the Douglas Fir tree. The NSC has been tasked with removing densely crowded and juvenile Douglas Fir trees as a way to curb this encroachment and increase sunlight availability for grass and forb species (see Figure 1). Many ecologists refer to the Douglas Fir forest ecosystem as the "Doug Fir dead zone" (interview, 2023) because of the tree's tendency to block out important sunlight and nutrients, which causes a reduction of biodiversity and ultimately, Tribal biological cultural resources.

Figure 1: A NSC steward (L) and California State Parks worker (R) engaging in Douglas Fir removal (credit: authors)



For Chairman Lopez, the restoration efforts contribute to healing. When asked about the importance of the NSC, he described how Native stewards at Quiroste Valley were able to, “restore relationships with the ground, the plants, and their own bodies...And how this physically demanding work contribute[s] to restoring self-identity and pride” (interview, 2022). Tribal stewards also talked about their experiences, specifically how the environmental work facilitated a stronger connection with Tribal members and among themselves. One steward mentioned, “When I think about Quiroste...I think about me building a relationship, my first relationships with the Native plants... my first real opportunity to feel a

strong connection to our Tribe and our people” (interview, 2024). Another steward said the work aided their personal self-healing and sobriety: “[The stewardship work] was healing for me. Spiritual. It helped me out, to stay sober, because I had my addiction problems, too. It kept me straight” (interview, 2024).

Despite the positive impacts of restoration, the Tribe’s work has been seriously challenged by local environmental organizations such as Green Foothills and the Sierra Club, Loma Prieta Chapter on grounds that the restoration efforts create an “artificial landscape” by removing trees that are “native to the site” (Committee for Green Foothills & Sierra Club Loma Prieta Chapter, 2017). Instead, the organizations assert the grasslands should resemble humans-less landscapes of “untouched wilderness”. In addition, they have questioned the Tribe’s traditional burning methods used in restoration projects and have rejected their linkages between restoration and cultural conservation by framing ancestral environmental management practices as “things of the past” (interview, 2022).

The case demonstrates how colonial conservation logics (see Dowie, 2011) continue to run deep in contemporary conservation circles while posing severe challenges to the continuity of Indigenous lifeways. The arguments held by the organisations erase the presence of Indigenous peoples from Quiroste Valley via their denial of Native ecological knowledges and past experiences, and by upholding impossible ideals of “unaltered” and “natural” landscapes. Further, they threaten to disrupt Tribal healing practices by calling into the question the legitimacy of the Tribe and by making it difficult for the AMTB to continue the restoration work. In the face of these challenges, the NSC confronts the problematic colonial legacy of environmental conservation and the interpretation of humans and nature as separate entities by firmly holding onto the Tribe’s ontological perspectives. Tribal ontologies understand people and nature as a relational element of ecosystems. In this view, restoration and stewardship are essential elements to healing landscapes in addition to healing Tribal members.

Research partnerships

The AMTB are driven by a moral obligation to their Creator to be stewards of their lands and to heal broken socio-environmental relationships. One way the Tribe had been able to do this is through collaborative research with non-Indigenous academics. Years of Indigenous knowledge suppression coupled with generations of land dispossession has created conditions where Tribal members lack the specific ecological knowledge systems to care for their ancestral landscapes. In 2006, the AMTB partnered with academics from University of California-Berkeley to initiate archaeological work with the purpose of learning more about the Tribe’s ancestors’ ways of life. The partnership emerged after extensive conversations about trusting academics coming from a discipline (Anthropology) that is known for some past problematic relationships with Native communities (see Kakaliouras, 2012; Highet, 2005). Californian anthropologists are also noted to have historically advanced extractive and epistemologically

violent practices in local Native communities (Nelson, 2021; Panich, 2013). Despite this, there are several well-known examples of anthropologists collaborating with Indigenous peoples on important work that is essential to the documentation and preservation of Native culture (for example, James Teit and the Salish St'át'imc Chiefs). Similarly, there are instances where anthropologists have productively worked with Californian Tribes to collectively learn about Indigenous lifeways of the past (see Field et al. 1992).

When the idea of an anthropological research partnership was first proposed to the Tribe, Chairman Lopez was hesitant and untrusting. He explained, “When the idea of our Tribe participating in this study first came to us, we were dubious. We could not understand why we would ever agree to participate in a project that could potentially disturb our ancestors” (Lopez 2013, p. 223). However, over time, the AMTB saw how a research partnership could improve their knowledge base on how their ancestors lived, what they ate, and how they tended the landscape – information that the Tribe knew very little about. A collaboration was then structured with a university team of anthropologists whereby the Tribe had the ultimate authority to decide on where excavation activities would take place. There was agreement that all culturally important artefacts would be re-buried once analysed, and both parties understood that if the team came across a burial site, they would not disturb it. The collaboration utilised novel low-impact methods to understand how Amah Mutsun ancestors stewarded past environments. The team also brought in historical ecologists, evolutionary biologists, and other relevant experts to inform the Tribe on the site-specific stewardship history of their cultural landscapes. For the AMTB, this fine-grained analysis was and continues to be helpful as it supports their interest in honouring their ancestors by restoring past knowledges and ecosystems.

The research partnership is ongoing. The partnership supports the Tribes' capacity to understand its cultural heritage, and for AMTB members to spread that knowledge to university students and one another. Chairman Lopez often speaks about how building trust with archaeologists took time, but ultimately this process has benefitted the Tribe immensely. The Chairman refers to research findings (see Lightfoot et al., 2021; Lightfoot & Lopez, 2013) as validation of Indigenous knowledge, and acknowledges how in some instances, the empirical research findings have assisted Traditional Ecological Knowledge become more accepted as a valid, standalone form of knowledge. The research partnerships represent one avenue through which the AMTB has worked to co-learn the ways of their ancestors, while reconciling and healing the historic tensions between anthropologists and Native peoples.

Campaign to protect Juristac

In addition to working within frameworks determined by formal environmental agencies and non-Indigenous experts, the AMTB continues its conservation work outside of these structures and employs more radical tactics to gain access

to land for healing purposes. Since 2017, the AMTB have led a public campaign to protect their ancestral territories from the establishment of a sand and gravel mine. The territory, called *Juristac*, translates to “Place of the Big Head” and is associated with the spirit called *Kuksui*. The site is known for its healing and renewal ceremonies that took place in the area for centuries, often attended by neighbouring Tribes. While the Tribe has not had access to this privately-owned ranch property for many years, members are enacting their cultural stewardship obligation through advocacy to care for the land. For almost 10 years, the Tribe has actively spoken out against the mine proposal that would transform over 403 acres of land into an extraction pit. Arguing the mine would destroy valuable animal habitats while desecrating spiritual places, the Tribe has held marches and protests (see Figure 2) in addition to collecting over 18,000 signatures of support and 10,000 public comment letters from people across the country.

Figure 2: “Walk for Juristac” rally on September 8th, 2019 in San Juan Bautista, California (credit: authors)



In gathering support for Juristac, the AMTB have spoken out against the legacies of colonialism, the long-lasting effects of the mission system, and the horrific mistreatment of the AMTB and other Californian Native peoples by the United States government. In these instances, healing is derived from revealing the “truth” about the Californian Indigenous experience, problematising dominant national historical narratives, and working alongside Tribal peoples and members of the public to protect ancestral territory. The double process of recognition is relevant here as the Juristac campaign, led by mostly Tribal youth, has ignited a sense of self-importance and collective strength among young members. It has underscored the importance of place-based song, dance, and other cultural activities in the revitalisation of broken environmental and social connections. At the same time, it has driven up awareness among California’s non-Indigenous population about the grave treatment of Native Peoples and the historical complicity of institutions (such as the Catholic church) in their exploitation. Given this, the

example of the Juristac campaign demonstrates the power of collective, multi-scalar efforts to foster healing processes for Indigenous peoples and the responsibility of non-Indigenous peoples to lend their support.

Conclusion

Our intervention provides the basis for what we hope will be long-lasting conversations about the role that “healing” can play in addressing past Indigenous traumas and in building more accountable state and non-state institutions. We argue that justice as healing for Native communities flows from the dual processes of “recognition” – namely, the internal recognition of one’s intrinsic value, and the external acknowledgement from institutions of their failures and complicity in Indigenous-targeted violence. Interpreted in this way, healing is a relational and mutually dependent process that is both the responsibility of Indigenous communities and their non-Indigenous counterparts. It depends on trust and reciprocity that slowly build over time through discussion, listening, and co-operation.

While this paper focused on the context of California, we argue that the AMTB case has ramifications for Indigenous peoples across the Americas, as we believe recognition lies at the heart of many Native struggles. The argument for a mutually dependent form of healing is particularly important for Tribes like the AMTB who do not have federal recognition. Without formal standing with the government, the Tribe is excluded from services and programs which can enhance the lives of community members. In the absence of this form of recognition, the Tribe has enacted creative and strategic ways to gain other forms of recognition from coalitions of state and non-state authorities to access knowledge and resources that are essential to the continuity of the Tribe. At the same time, the AMTB works outside of these dominant structures and mobilises its members alongside other Tribes and non-Indigenous allies to struggle against state, conservationist, and commercial forces which threaten their place-based existence.

The experiences of non-federally recognised Tribes and the methods they use to ensure their survival are important to elevate as their ongoing challenges are often not included in contemporary recognition politics scholarship. We hope our work expands recognition politics discussions by highlighting the complex realities of the AMTB and similar Tribes. Furthermore, we hope it sheds light on the future tangible possibilities of mutual healing. In this vein, we end with an uplifting update: In January 2026, efforts to protect Juristac succeeded through a partnership between the AMTB and the organisation, Peninsula Open Space Trust (POST). POST purchased 2,284 acres of the ranch property on which Juristac stands, bringing the total of owned land to 6,114 acres (POST, 2026). While the primary goal of the purchase is to protect the property’s habitat and biodiversity value for at-risk species, an equally important goal is to secure Tribal access and preserve the area’s spiritual and cultural significance, now

known as the *Juristac Tribal Cultural Landscape*. This outcome demonstrates the power of healing through internal and external recognition and the positive outcomes that can materialise for Indigenous communities in California and beyond.

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