

Madera’s Menacing Prisons and The Preciados: An Analysis of Racialization in Madera at the Turn of the Century Through Newspapers

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Introduction

The United States has always been a settler colonial society. Settler colonists arrive in new lands with the intention to stay and prosper in those lands, while refusing to coexist with the indigenous population. Rather, they utilize a variety of means to replace the original inhabitants.² Kelly Hernández’s *City of Inmates* claims this process was inherently genocidal.³ Hernández supports this claim by arguing that the modern incarceration system was designed to eliminate marginalized peoples through non-lethal means.⁴ The newspaper, *Madera Mercury* situates Madera, California within this narrative of the United States’ incarceration system. According to Peter Boag, newspapers like the *Madera Mercury* serve “as the most abundant and richest source[s] for understanding a community’s collective views.”⁵ Newspapers mirror community values, which situate local news publications as trustworthy sources of information. As a result, newspapers are in a position to not only reflect community values but to also inform them. The *Madera Mercury* used much of its ink to cover local crimes; and through its influence, the newspaper disproportionately criminalized non-white people with the use of dehumanizing language and varying degrees of detail. The *Madera Mercury* used its influence to

¹ The author, being also an editor, recused himself from the editing process regarding this article. It received no special treatment and was required to conform to all standard requirements.

² Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz. “This Land.” in *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States*, (Beacon Press, 2014), 6-8.

³ Kelly L. Hernandez, “Conquest and Incarceration.” in *City of Inmates Conquest, Rebellion, and the Rise of Human Caging in Los Angeles, 1771-1965*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 9.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Peter Boag. *Re-Dressing America’s Frontier Past*, (University of California Press, 2011), 17.

directly inform public perception about non-white peoples, thus maintaining settler colonialism and white supremacy in Madera County.

While the newspaper worked to criminalize non-white peoples, it is also apparent that targeted racial minorities were capable of becoming white, if specific circumstances were met. The success of one Mexican family, the Preciados, reveals that Anglo settlers occasionally valued non-white peoples, but strictly on the basis of wealth and noble marriage. Wealth allowed for the Preciados to become influential traders in Madera County, while noble marriages were necessary for establishing networks of affluence. The Preciado family is evidence that, on occasion, non-white peoples living and working on the Western frontier could achieve the benefits of whiteness through affluence and networking, situating otherwise racialized peoples in positions more effectively able to navigate the carceral nature of settler colonialism.

Criminalization Through Newspapers

The criminalization of non-white peoples by the *Madera Mercury* is notable through the coverage of a local murder. On June 29, 1901, the *Madera Mercury* published an article with the headline reading, “A MURDEROUS INDIAN. The Shooter of the Indian Antone in Jail.”⁶ This headline perfectly summarizes the article, which provides almost no information on the shooter or victim. However, the headline emphasizes the race of all involved and does not even name the murderer. This emphasis on race continued in the article with Joe’s (the murderer) name mentioned once in the article and was referred to as a “redskin” or “Indian” afterward.⁷ The absence of Joe’s name connects Joe’s actions to his race as opposed to him as an individual. In other words, rather than informing the reader that Joe was a murderer, the reader is informed that an “Indian” was a murderer. Joe is completely erased from the narrative because his side of the

⁶ E.E. Vincent. *Madera Mercury*, June 28, 1901, 3.

⁷ Ibid.

story was not present in the article. Without being able to justify his actions, Joe was erased from memory and this murder was used to criminalize indigenous peoples. Furthermore, the victim's race became inextricably linked to his identity. The article only mentioned Antone's name once and subsequently only mentioned him as an "Indian."⁸ Thus, race was an essential inclusion in the *Madera Mercury* when discussing crimes involving non-whites, regardless of whether the non-white was a criminal or victim.

The coverage of John Garner's murder and suicide by the *Madera Mercury* shows how white criminals had their actions minimized. On July 13, 1901, the *Madera Mercury*'s main headline read, "MURDER AND SUICIDE John Garner Shot his Wife Fatally this Morning..."⁹ Unlike Joe's headline, this headline gives Garner's full name without mentioning his race, which disconnects Garner's actions from his race. The article took up more than half of the first page, which allowed it to include all the details of the story. Among these details, the reader learns that Garner only murdered his wife because she was divorcing him and taking the kids.¹⁰ This does not justify Garner's actions but it minimizes the cruelty of his crime because it ties the crime to an understandable motive. This humanization allows for Garner to be seen as a murderer for specific reasons and not because of his race. This reveals how the *Madera Mercury* attempted to humanize Anglo criminals to prevent their actions from being tied to their race. Furthermore, by doing the opposite for non-white criminals, the *Madera Mercury* was able to criminalize non-whites. This justified and contributed to their elimination from Madera through incarceration.

The Preciados

⁸ E.E. Vincent. *Madera Mercury*, June 28, 1901, 3.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

The Preciado family was unique among racial minorities for their ability to avoid the negative effects of settler colonialism in the western United States. Settler colonialism traditionally “harbors no intentions of merging with...the Indigenous societies already established within the targeted land base.”¹¹ In short, settler colonialism does not permit settlers mixing with original inhabitants. However, the Preciado family was prized in Madera, which demonstrates that settler colonialism in the United States did allow for some merging with marginalized peoples. The Preciados were undoubtedly accepted into Maderan society because they were the only non-whites to be featured in stories that did not relate to crime. For example, the only non-white to serve on a jury was Ygnacio Jr. Preciado.¹² Additionally, two Preciados won first and second place for their floats in Madera’s Fourth of July parade.¹³ In other words, the Preciados were able to enjoy the benefits of whiteness in Madera, but were only able to do so because of their wealth and marriages.

The Preciado family in one generation went from being a lower income immigrant family to a considerably wealthy business family. The family patriarch, Ygnacio Preciado, immigrated to the United States from Sonora in 1848.¹⁴ He roamed Northern California in search of gold until he settled in Madera in 1880.¹⁵ Ygnacio used his savings to buy ranches in Madera and became a successful rancher in Madera county.¹⁶ He had twelve children who contributed to the family’s wealth through their successful businesses. Among them was Ygnacio Jr. who started a line of barber shops in San Francisco and Madera.¹⁷ Also, Charles and Rudolph opened

¹¹ Kelly L. Hernandez. *City of Inmates*, (University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 7.

¹² E.E. Vincent. *Madera Mercury*, July 20, 1901, 2.

¹³ E.E. Vincent. *Madera Mercury*, July 06, 1901, 3 & 7.

¹⁴ William Coate, “Madera the Village, 1876-1900.” in *Images of America: Madera*, (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2005), 27.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ *A Madera Pioneer Family: The Preciados*, (The Madera County Historian, Volume 8, Number 1, 1968), 3.

¹⁷ Ibid., 4.

a successful stationary store in Madera and formed an amateur baseball team to represent the city.¹⁸ Overall, the family businesses produced considerable wealth for the Preciados. The Preciados utilized this wealth to gain acceptance among Maderans.

Wealth was crucial for marginalized peoples to be accepted into white society, but marriages were just as important. For frontier settlements like Madera, Anne Hyde claims that “a woman’s decision to marry this man or that...made differences in how lives turned out.”¹⁹ In short, marriages could change the fortunes of entire families. This phenomenon manifested itself with the Preciados who benefited from their marriages to influential figures. Prior to their settlement in Madera, Ygnacio Preciado married Adelaida Norriega in 1867.²⁰ The Norriegas were descendants of the Moraga family, which were part of the Spanish elite in California.²¹ Adelaida’s sister, Charlotte, was married to a California superior judge.²² Once Ygnacio married Adelaida, he gained connections to the Moragas and California’s judicial system, which allowed the Preciados to be well connected in California.

Although the marriages above gave the Preciados important connections in California, the Preciados still needed to secure their position in Madera specifically. This was achieved shortly after the family arrived in Madera, with the first Preciado daughter, Lucy, marrying Thomas Cosgrave. Cosgrave was well known for being a veteran, local poet,²³ and for his weekly column in the *Madera Mercury*, which highlighted the previous week’s events.²⁴ Lucy’s marriage to Cosgrave consolidated the Preciado’s position in Madera. Overall, the bonds forged

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Anne F. Hyde. “Unintended Consequences,” in *Empires, Nations & Families: A History of the North American West, 1800-1860*, (University of Nebraska Press, 2011), 354.

²⁰ *A Madera Pioneer Family: The Preciados*, (The Madera County Historian, Volume 8, Number 1, 1968), 1.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 1-2.

²³ Ibid., 4.

²⁴ E.E. Vincent. *Madera Mercury*, July 20, 1901, 1.

between families through marriages were coupled with wealth, in order to allow the Preciados to mask their race. This allowed for the Preciados to live in Madera without discrimination.

Conclusion

Madera at the turn of the century exemplifies the United States as a settler colonial society. The *Madera Mercury* promoted settler colonialism by criminalizing racial minorities, through the use of language and detail. This criminalization attached a negative meaning to racial minorities that were nearly impossible to eliminate. However, racial minorities with wealth and important connections were free from this maltreatment. The Preciados met these requisites through the ownership of businesses and high-status marriages, allowing them to overcome the obstacles from Mexican heritage. In doing so, the Preciados were able to enjoy the benefits of whiteness in Madera. This paper builds on the idea of race being a socio-historical construction by highlighting the manner in which meaning was attached to race. However, the meaning attached to race is not permanent because the Preciados show the fluid nature of race through their ability to become white.

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