

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Ethnography at Its Edges

Toward Indigenous fire relations in California

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When it all burns: Fighting fire in a transformed world

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California's relationship to fire is emblematic of contemporary political, economic, and socioecological dynamics. In California, there is incredible socioecological diversity in a land where other-than-human life-forms are marvelously adapted to landscape fires. We find many distinct Indigenous communities, each with ultralocal, ingenious fire applications embedded in their cosmologies, cultures, and economies. We also find destruction, pain, and loss caused by fires that are shaped and exacerbated by the colonial-capitalist system of fire and land management.

In January 2025, metropolitan Los Angeles experienced some of the most destructive fires in California and regional history. Tens of thousands of homes were burned, 31 people died directly from the fires, and hundreds of excess deaths occurred throughout the region as the fires burned and toxic smoke belched from homes constructed with toxic materials (Paglino et al., 2025). The Los Angeles fires, consistent with other disasters, displaced the poor, the elderly, and people of color who also suffered disproportionately from price gouging and predatory speculation in the postfire housing market (Hall, 2026; Portela, 2025). This outcome had been foretold for decades by social critic Mike Davis (1998), who observed that real estate developers, alongside local governments, have consistently expanded subdivisions and gated communities into the fire-prone and mountainous areas of Southern California since the early 20th century. Historically, fire patterns in the region included smaller, lower-intensity fires, often set purposefully by Indigenous peoples under more moderate weather conditions, punctuated by larger fires about every 20 years (Lombardo et al., 2009). Today, however, larger and more severe fires are becoming regular occurrences, often ignited accidentally by degraded electrical infrastructure and power equipment (Syphard & Keeley, 2015). When the homes of the wealthy have burned in places like Malibu and Pacific Palisades, the state and federal governments have repeatedly subsidized the rebuilding. In a region where fire is expected, climate changes are creating

hotter and drier conditions, and the marks of Indigenous fire traditions on the land point to another way, does rebuilding make sense? Or rather, what is it that we should rebuild?

Jordan Thomas's *When It All Burns* is one of several timely books about wildfires written for a popular audience that residents of places like Los Angeles would benefit from reading. These books contribute to reimagining human relationships to fire, in California and elsewhere, because they demonstrate that we have failed to confront the pains of our socioecological and climate realities. This failure is rooted in the inability to reckon with the violent histories that gave rise to them and the legacies that sustain them. Such a reckoning demands revisiting the original and present-day conditions that uphold the paradigm of fire suppression.

If the term is novel to those outside of fire management, *fire suppression* encapsulates the standard practice of extinguishing all landscape fires as soon as possible, using impressive deployments of human work crews, heavy industrial ground equipment, and aircraft equipped with chemical retardants. Thomas's book centers on his experience as a hotshot: firefighters employed by the US Forest Service who are often considered the elites of wildland firefighting. The first hotshot crew was established in 1948 (pp. 56–57) at the Los Padres National Forest, where Thomas, a graduate student in anthropology, trained during the summer of 2021. The book moves between poignant ethnographic vignettes about Thomas's stint as a hotshot, during which he spent months on end battling wildfires, and compelling analysis of the historical conditions that have made professional wildland firefighting what it is today: grueling, exploitative, and sometimes lethal for both human and other-than-human life-forms. While being a hotshot has always been difficult, strenuous work, Thomas finds himself stepping into a world of wildland firefighting that the "old-timers" tell him is, in many ways, dramatically different from what they have long known. Over the past few decades, especially, fires have been burning "like never before." While the ethnography provides a window into how hotshots are adapting to the "new normal" in real time, the historical analysis shows why the institutions employing and shaping the conditions of

firefighting have been slow to do the same—and perhaps why, in their current makeup, they may not be equipped to do so.

How did we get here? Thomas's explanation starts by returning to early Spanish and Anglo colonization, when long-standing Indigenous fire relations were upended through violence, land appropriation, forced assimilation, and other heinous colonial policies. He shows that the genocidal settlers in California not only sought to incentivize Indigenous extermination with bounties but also prevented Indigenous peoples from maintaining their subsistence practices, including those reliant on landscape burning. Thomas writes, "If California is the clearest case of genocide in U.S. history, then genocide is the clearest case of fire suppression" (p. 111). Fire suppression, in other words, contributed to unraveling whole ways of life for California's many Indigenous communities. Importantly, Thomas notes that similar and simultaneous prohibitions on burning and other subsistence practices were introduced across Europe. The analysis highlights a governance logic that emerged across much of the then-industrializing capitalist world: that of eliminating the social and ecological relations that sustain collective livelihoods outside the emerging market economy, where wage labor was becoming entrenched. While the continental leap in the story underscores the scope and scale of socioecological transformation, the specifics of the settler-colonial context in California and across North America return us to experiences that will define where we go from here.

The 19th-century genocide was *apocalyptic* for Indigenous peoples and ecologies throughout California (and North America). Yet today's climate change discourses often suggest that everything we are—or will soon be—living through is unprecedented. Usually, a sense of crisis and urgency closely follows from this understanding. While galvanizing in some ways, such sentiments risk justifying hasty, irresponsible, inequitable, inadequate, and often violent "climate action," especially by state and corporate actors. The Potawatomi scholar Kyle Whyte (2020) discusses this through the lens of "crisis epistemology." As Whyte and other Indigenous scholars have noted, the sense of an unprecedented crisis reflects historical amnesia. It not only ignores or downplays how devastating settler colonialism was (and continues to be) for Indigenous peoples, but it also fails to contend with contemporary apocalypses, climate related and otherwise. This is because the narratives obscure a fundamental fact: there are living (Indigenous) communities and cultures that have "been here before." Turning to them now is therefore critical (and perhaps a moral imperative). But it requires more than just "incorporating" Indigenous traditional ecological knowledges (TEK) into existing fire- and land-management paradigms. It requires Indigenous leadership and decision-making power (Martinez et al., 2023) that can reshape social, cultural, political, ecological, and economic relations.

In the later chapters, Thomas introduces Indigenous-led organizations like the Tribal EcoRestoration Alliance (TERA), which is involved in expanding Indigenous-led burning in Pomo territory in the 2020s. Such efforts, however, should be situated in a broader social and historical context. The same lens that Thomas applies to his discussions of Indigenous resistance to early Spanish colonization, including the first systematic fire

prohibitions, would be instructive and necessary here. Throughout the 20th—and now the 21st—century, some Indigenous peoples continued to resist fire bans by surreptitiously and cooperatively burning. They did so to maintain their cultures and lifeways, even though this sometimes led to imprisonment. Furthermore, the Indigenous social movements of the 20th century were critical in creating the conditions that have allowed for the legislative and funding shifts occurring today, which, as Thomas acknowledges, result from Indigenous organizing and leadership (p. 314). The Red Power movement of the 1960s and 1970s included intense struggles in California, such as the occupation of Alcatraz, the struggles over Pit River lands, and the fight against logging in the sacred mountains of the Yurok, Karuk, Hupa, and Tolowa peoples (Blansett, 2018; Bowers & Carpenter, 2011). These movements are critical parts of California Indigenous history, too often omitted from reporting, even though they contributed to major political and legal changes like the Self-Determination Act of 1975, which enabled further land rematriation and the development of tribally governed wildland fire agencies. Indigenous presence in the wildland fire system, including the hotshots, has been a way (albeit partial and uneven) for Indigenous peoples in California to maintain their fire knowledges and later assert further change to fire policy within the US and California governments (Eriksen & Hankins, 2014).

These dimensions of Indigenous social justice and anti-colonial struggles matter for a discussion of Indigenous burning, underscoring a critical point: burning is about not only fire but also the relationships and ways of life that anchor land-based practices (Tom et al, 2023). Here, intergenerational knowledge transmission is key. We glimpse this through an interaction Thomas has with a First Nation Nlaka'pamux fire practitioner during a prescribed burn operation in central California (pp. 301–4). After a 50-year career as a firefighter for his First Nation, the practitioner attended the burn to build relationships and exchange knowledge that could help further his quest to restore burning among his own people in Canada. The practitioner recounts his grandfather teaching him about fire as a child. The fire he learned about, much like the fire he and Thomas are monitoring in the vignette, was intentionally set. While the world the practitioner describes seems distant (ecologically, culturally, politically), Thomas senses it in his body in that moment. Unlike the megafires that Thomas faced in his time as a hotshot, these fires "coaxed [him] into calm" (p. 301). The low-intensity, intentional fire set the scene further: not only by bringing Thomas and the Nlaka'pamux practitioner together, but also by sustaining the oak they are seated against and inviting the visit of red-tailed hawks flying above the burn site. Nevertheless, Thomas's ingrained orientation to fire, shaped by his experience as a hotshot, comes to the surface. As he and the First Nation practitioner converse, the winds begin to pick up, and the fire's behavior changes. Thomas stands up quickly and grabs his shovel, ready to employ one of the basic firefighting tactics he would have used countless times as a hotshot. But the elder practitioner chuckles and tells him to sit down and "let it burn just a little longer."

Thomas's ethnographic vignettes remind us of the powerful autoethnography *Fire Country*, written by Victor Steffensen

(2020), a Tagalaka man from Australia. Steffensen documents his introduction to burning from his elders and his lifelong journey applying and teaching Aboriginal fire knowledge. He shares rich stories about plants and animal adaptations to fires, showing that the land has taught him to apply fire at the right time. He also shares stories about how non-Indigenous people have resisted Indigenous teachings and how some have come to embrace them. Australia faces many of the same ecological dynamics associated with fire exclusion as California, but Indigenous peoples in Australia have maintained more areas under Indigenous stewardship to support an active burning regimen for their livelihoods and land health. The lessons Steffensen imparts are based on the many burns he has conducted, integrating complex ecological knowledge with a social critique of colonialism. Steffensen's knowledge and experience are unique, and we are fortunate to have such a record to honor the incredible knowledge of his elders, which advances the discussion in leaps and bounds toward a new fire future.

Thomas, like Steffensen, develops powerful stories about his own transformation, including learning to see the land in new ways. By being vulnerable about this process, Thomas invites readers to question their own assumptions. One example is when Thomas learns about ecological indicators from Axel, a respected hotshot with at least a decade of experience. Axel helps Thomas identify the characteristics of the commercial forests their crew is assigned to protect from fire. Thomas, like many who are not regularly immersed in forests, did not join his fire-suppression crew knowing how to read a landscape's historical ecology. He writes,

I realized that I had seen these trees as an emblem of my own desires, my longing for a natural world that had been starved of healthy fire, but if protected from megafires, could someday return to stability. I had clung to this idea because it gave meaning to my exhaustion, sweat, and pain. Now the forest transformed in my eyes from natural ecology to market economy, then into a wall of flames galloping toward us through the treetops. (p. 152)

In this same section, Thomas integrates the interlocking relationship between corporate timber interests and the development of the US Forest Service, which has produced densely stocked timber plantations with low biodiversity and high fire risk (see also Hudson, 2011). In chapter 10, Thomas connects the development of fire-suppression bureaucracies with the military-industrial complex and neoliberal models of governance, partly through an encounter with a retired Vietnam War-era hotshot superintendent. In the retired superintendent's days, when helicopters transported crewmembers to a fire,

instead of dropping the hotshots in a meadow, they would bomb a hilltop and land in the crater. Meanwhile, Monsanto, among the world's largest petrochemical corporations, began selling off its excess cache of Agent Orange to the US Forest Service in the guise of fire prevention. (p. 189)

These insights help us see the foundational connections between US imperialism and the US government's treatment of the land within the fire-suppression system they have imposed and developed (see also Pyne, 2016; Kosek, 2006).

While the book discusses many legal and institutional barriers to transforming fire suppression and confronting present climate realities, it also highlights the transformations needed at the cultural and embodied levels. This is where Thomas's ethnographic discussion of his personal journey of becoming a hotshot is insightful. As he details how his body is pushed to its limits under the extreme physical conditions of fighting megafires, the reader is reminded that grappling with the effects of climate change involves grappling with the body's transformations and adaptations. For if genocide, timber extraction, militarism, and so on constitute the "legacy" that hotshots have inherited, then the marks of that legacy are visible on a hotshot's body, which Thomas aptly identifies as a "sacrifice zone," much like the frontline communities whose disproportionate burden of climate change has been documented by environmental justice scholars and activists. Thomas demonstrates the extent of the psychological, physical, emotional, economic, and familial sacrifices hotshots make in confronting this legacy. The author, however, overlooks a whole other population being sacrificed: incarcerated firefighters. We mention them here not simply to point out an omission but to highlight that the experience of incarcerated firefighters is inextricable from the web of exploitation, hardship, and personal turmoil that Thomas and his crewmates endure.

Incarcerated firefighters are incentivized to fight fires through California's "conservation camps" (Goodman, 2014). While employed by the State of California, rather than the federal government (which employs the hotshots), incarcerated firefighters are nevertheless a pillar of the "fire-industrial complex" (p. 194) that Thomas discusses. The State of California depends on these people, just as the federal government depends on the hotshots to perform cheap, dangerous labor, primarily to protect the property of corporations and the wealthy (Lowe, 2021). Incarcerated firefighters are disproportionately Black, Indigenous, and Latinx (Legislative Analyst's Office, 2024), and they largely come from California's deeply impoverished coastal metropolises. The conditions and processes shaping their marginalization inside and outside prison are connected to those that afflicted Indigenous peoples through successive waves of colonization (Gali, 2023; Hernández, 2017; Lumsden, 2021). In the 19th century, the Spanish mission system instituted fire prohibitions that criminalized Indigenous burning. In the early 20th century, the Forest Service punished Indigenous peoples for setting fires by detaining them and forcing them to suppress fires in their homelands (Davies & Frank, 1992), prefiguring today's dilemma. Today, communities of color, relegated to low-wage jobs and inflated living costs, often engage in an informal survival economy that is criminalized. As long as the state imprisons the "relative surplus population" (Gilmore, 2007) and deploys them to fight fires for cheap, those addressing the working conditions, occupational health, compensation, and benefits for hotshots and all wildland firefighters, as Thomas does, will also need to address racial capitalism and its deliberate obstruction to creating just

socioecological futures (Heynen & Ybarra, 2021). Indigenous peoples, as Thomas notes (p. 80), rebelled against the inhumane conditions in the Spanish missions and burned some of them down. Similar prison uprisings continue among those imprisoned in the contemporary United States who challenge the racist exploitation at the foundations of incarceration and the larger society (Burton, 2023; Friedman, 2025). Some of the experienced fire managers with whom we have trained recognize that in building transformative fire relations, it is critical to address the exploitative nature of the fire-industrial complex for incarcerated and nonincarcerated fire workers.

All this brings us back to the question of where to go from here. The resurgence of Indigenous burning in California marks a significant step toward rethinking fundamental principles, practices, and policies of fire suppression, both within and beyond the state fire apparatus. Thomas's experience in Indigenous-led collaborative fire stewardship spaces after his hotshot stint provides a glimpse into what this world looks like. He shares the words of a Pomo woman helping lead a burn. The woman, like the women who lead the Yurok Cultural Fire Management Council and those who have organized the Karuk Women's Prescribed Fire Training Exchange in Northern California (Oaster, 2022; Robbins & Marks-Block, 2026), represents what San Carlos Apache scholar Melinda Adams describes as the matriarchal ecology of the Indigenous fire resurgence (Adams, 2023). By organizing burning around Indigenous ceremony and sovereignty, these spaces not only challenge racial capitalism but also neutralize the toxic masculinity and harassment that are ubiquitous in the male-dominated fire-management world. While Thomas addresses this in his book, another recent memoir by River Selby (2025), who was a hotshot for a decade, provides an expansive view of the sexist harassment in the fire world that patriarchal bureaucracies try to protect. Here, there is an important distinction between fire suppression as a tactic for controlling fire and as one deployed by an industrial complex that is militaristic, colonial, sexist, and racist. Thomas writes, "It is not necessarily a problem that people make a living from fire suppression; fire suppression is needed so long as degraded forests and a carbon-infused atmosphere produce destructive megafires" (p. 195). Certainly, as long as wayward flames in the wrong place, at the wrong time, need to be extinguished, there will be a need for a capable workforce that can do so. But this is different from sustaining fire suppression as an industrial complex. The latter never served the needs of ecological communities or the homes of rural communities, and it is slowly eroding, as we observe. Too many people who developed their careers in suppression are recognizing its deep faults and contradictions, especially when they collaborate with Indigenous fire practitioners. Thomas has provided an excellent account of how this process is unfolding.

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