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# Indigenous Words and Worlds: Themes of Cultural Loss and Longing in the Writing of Marie Potts

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## Abstract

Colonial subjugation and English language acquisition are permanently entangled in the contemporary politics of Native Americans peoples, who often struggle to recover and reproduce ancestral languages, ceremonies, and oral traditions. For many Native Americans writers like Marie Mason Potts, a California Indian (Mountain Maidu) author, activist and newspaper editor, English language literacy was a skill acquired in the context of off-reservation boarding schools, where it was deployed as a government-mandated tool of forced assimilation to Euro-American religions, socioeconomic ideologies, and gender roles. English acquisition was envisioned in terms of total linguistic exchange or replacement, versus bilingual enrichment, and its monolingual presence in boarding school environments was assured through a variety of disciplinary techniques that ranged from corporal punishment to public humiliation. Potts was a product of two such settings: Greenville Indian Industrial School, in Northern California, to which she was taken in 1899 at four years old, and Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania, from which she graduated in 1915. By the time Potts died in 1978, she had produced a significant corpus of writing, including two brief books about California Indians, three decades worth of editorial columns and news stories produced as publisher/editor of the *Smoke Signal* and reams of archived correspondence related to California Indian claims against the federal government for theft of ancestral lands. This suite of sources offers valuable insight into her subjectivity as both a Native American and a boarding school alumna. This paper will demonstrate that in her essays, editorials and books, Potts always sought to impress upon mainstream readers the basic humanity American Indians shared with dominant, settler society, even as she foregrounded cultural difference and loss by narrating memories of Mountain Maidu lands, kinship and belonging that poignantly referenced the pre-English, Indigenous words and worlds of her early childhood.

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