

Kroeber Hall and Berkeley Anthropology: What's in an Un-Naming?

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Abstract: *The University of California, Berkeley, is considering a proposal to un-name a building that honors Alfred L. Kroeber (1876-1960), one of the leading liberal anthropologists in the United States. Tony Platt describes the controversy and explains why it is time to come to terms with Berkeley's "salvage archaeology" that deepened the misery of survivors of genocide by plundering the graves of 10,000 ancestors on Kroeber's watch.*

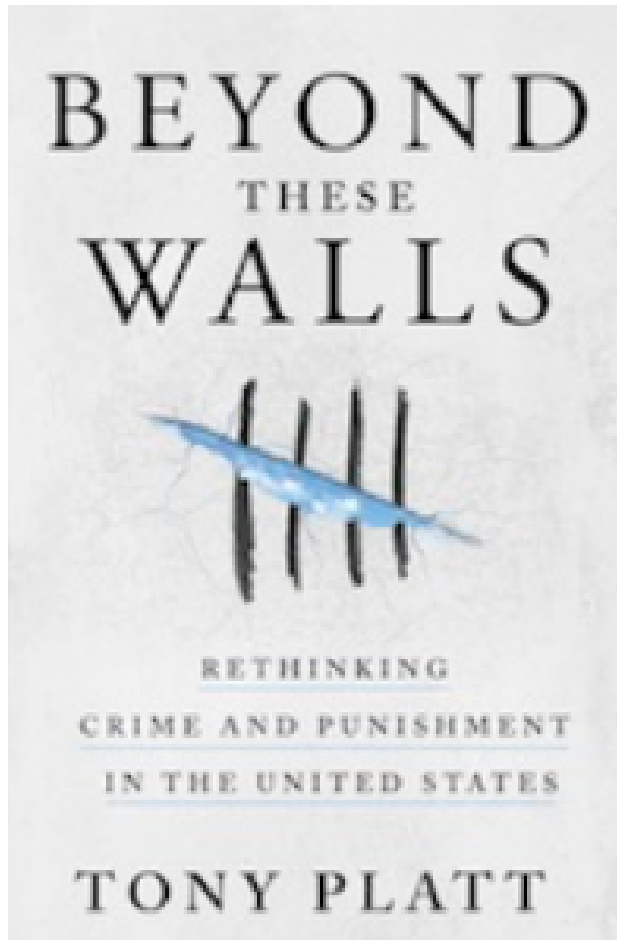
he was the key academic in a department and museum that rose to fame - literally and scientifically - on the bodies of the Native dead.

Kroeber's reputation in anthropology rests upon his vast scholarship and knowledge, his success in quickly building Berkeley's department of anthropology into a nationally ranked program, and his documentation of the cultural experiences and languages of California Indians prior to Spanish colonialism and American genocide. He recorded stories, rituals, and locations of sacred sites that, in the words of a Yurok leader, "would not have been documented if it hadn't been for Kroeber."¹

I welcome the news that the Berkeley campus has joined the un-naming movement. It provides us with an opportunity to learn about histories we've forgotten and to make the honoring of spaces and places into a democratic process rather than a done deal decided by elites in back rooms.

John Boalt, the 19th century anti-Chinese crusader, is already banished from Berkeley's law school walls. The University is likely to follow the example of a local elementary school and remove the name of John LeConte, an unreconstructed Southern racist, from the building that houses the physics department.

Upcoming on the list is anthropologist Alfred Kroeber (1876-1960), after whom Kroeber Hall is named. He didn't campaign to restrict immigration to the United States on the basis of race, and he wasn't a white supremacist. But



Beyond these walls

- walls that contain millions of our brothers and sisters,

walls that divide us,

walls that constrain our idealism,

walls that partition our ideas,

and walls that cut us off from the past

- sweet freedom still faintly calls.

(St. Martin's Press, January 2019)

Kroeber didn't jump on the eugenics bandwagon that was so popular among his

cohort. He dismissed biologically based arguments about racial difference in favor of cultural relativism. "It is a difficult task," he wrote in 1923, "to establish any race as either superior or inferior to another, but relatively easy to prove that we entertain a strong prejudice in favor of our racial superiority."² Near the end of his career, Kroeber supported Native land claims, for which the Council of California Indians acknowledged the role he had played in the struggle "for long delayed justice."³

To most California Tribes and Native activists, especially those in the Bay Area, however, Kroeber's legacy is more bitter than sweet.

First, Kroeber failed in his responsibility to speak out publicly about the genocide that followed the Gold Rush. "What happened to the California Indians following 1849 - their disruption, losses, sufferings, and adjustments - fall into the purview of the historian," he wrote in 1954, "rather than the anthropologist whose prime concern is the purely aboriginal, the uncontaminatedly native."⁴ The transformation of everyday life after contact was traumatic, Kroeber conceded in a 1959 article, but, he added, "it is not gone into here." It wasn't that he didn't know. He just didn't go into it.⁵

Moreover, Kroeber did not explore the extent to which his subjects' recollections of pre-contact life were mediated by their direct or indirect knowledge of the catastrophe that swept through their Tribes in the second half of the nineteenth century. What Kroeber considered to be inherent in Native cultures from time immemorial - their melancholy "punctured by choler" and their tales suffused with an "almost elegiac emotion" - was no doubt survivors' depression and recall of dreadful times.⁶

Kroeber's hands-off attitude towards the genocide influenced anthropological discourse

in California for the first half of the 20th century. One consequence of this widespread moral cowardice and selective forgetting was that until the 1960s a crude and racist imagery about California Indians dominated the state's public discourse, making it easier to frame their near extermination in the imagery of natural history, subject to inevitable processes of erosion and decline, rather than as the result of a planned human intervention. Many people hold Kroeber accountable because he had resources and authority to influence public opinion. Of course, one person, even Kroeber, did not wield such power, but he became the personification of meticulous amnesia. Unlike his widow Theodora Kroeber, who spoke out against the genocide, and his colleague Robert Heizer, who at the end of his career issued a *mea culpa* for his role in treating California's Tribal peoples as "non-persons," Kroeber kept his silence.⁷

"It's never too late to honor the dead." (Toni Morrison, 2008)

Secondly, as a core faculty member of Berkeley's department of anthropology (1901-1946) and as director of the anthropology museum (1925-1946), Kroeber was responsible for the University's collection of more than ten thousand Native human remains that it plundered from Native graveyards, and tens of thousands of Native artifacts that were stolen from graves or bought cheaply from the desperate survivors of genocide. Kroeber may have repudiated purely biological theories of race, but he recruited Edward Gifford to the university and encouraged him to acquire and study vast amounts of skeletal material.⁸ Moreover, Kroeber acquired a great deal of cultural information from burials – age of settlements, diet, causes of death, mortuary rituals, etc. –

before the dead were dismantled and reduced to physical specimens back in the lab.

On Kroeber's watch, the department and museum publicized the location of Native burial sites, and encouraged amateur collectors, from wealthy philanthropists to local hobbyists, to dig up graves and send skeletons to Berkeley. The university's expeditions were scrupulously careful to get authorization from landowners before carrying out excavations but did nothing to track down descendants of the buried to get their permission. Occasionally, a tribe would have resources to hire lawyers and threaten the University with criminal charges for digging up "the remains of human beings without proper permission," as the Yokayo Rancheria did in 1906, but the University's widespread grave-robbing continued unabated in California until the Northwest Indian Cemetery Protection Association, a grassroots intertribal organization founded in 1970, "raised havoc" and forced a halt to excavations.⁹

I've recently read hundreds of Berkeley's archaeological reports. Not once have I come across an account that treats the excavated as other than objects of research. No prayers are spoken, no rituals practiced, no indication that the living and the dead, white and Native, share a common humanity.

The reputation of Berkeley's anthropology department was boosted by its relationship with Ishi, a Yahi survivor of massacres, bounty hunts, and epidemics, who emerged from hiding in the small California town of Oroville in 1911 to become a big-time celebrity in San Francisco, in the words of anthropologist Thomas Waterman, as a "good exhibit for the public."¹⁰ Kroeber's guardianship of Ishi and, later, his decision to send Ishi's brain to the National Museum in 1916, are typically cited as examples of his occasional inhumanity, but this was not an isolated incident. He encouraged his colleagues to dig up more than four hundred shellmounds in the Bay Area, looting bodies

and goods that he acknowledged had accumulated for a few thousand years.¹¹

The University backed up Kroeber's collecting frenzy and in 1948 proudly showed off to *Life* magazine its "bone collection [that] has filled two museums and overflows into the Campanile."¹²

Thirdly, as Karuk scholar Julian Lang has noted, Kroeber was so preoccupied with precontact cultures that "he never introduced us to the living people."¹³ This is not just a critique of Kroeber's specialized focus, but also of his failure to document how Native peoples survived against all odds and lived to fight another day. Activists looking for inspirational accounts of struggle, organization, and resistance find little solace in Kroeber's work, which has a tendency to be nostalgic for the good old days rather than forward-looking.

Kroeber was not particularly interested in the cultures of Bay Area Indians, reporting that they had made "an unfavorable impression" on "early voyagers" as "dark, dirty, squalid, and apathetic." Moreover, he concluded in 1925 that the Bay Area "Costanoan group is extinct as far as all practical purposes are concerned."¹⁴ This seemingly authoritative pronouncement, note representatives of the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe of the San Francisco Bay Area, "shaped the politics of powerlessness for the Ohlones for many decades [and] reinforced the widely held notion that cultural transformations among native peoples erase their indigenous identity."¹⁵

Walking around the Berkeley campus, it is easy to get the impression that the Ohlone are extinct. A plaque at the university's entrance acknowledges that a Spanish expeditionary force set up camp here in 1772. There are no plaques to mark the settlements of people who lived in this area a few thousand years earlier.

The football stadium commemorates faculty, staff, and students who died during World War I. There is no memorial to the thousands of Ohlone who lived and died in this region. One would never know that the University was built in the wake of genocide or that it grabbed its land from survivors.¹⁶ A graceful archway celebrates the life of Phoebe Hearst whose philanthropy funded the excavation of Native graves. There is no comparable recognition of the thousands of people who were dug up from their graves in the name of science and "saving a vanishing race."

Removing Kroeber's name from a building is a symbolic act that will not shake up the foundations of the University's settler colonial origins. But it might provoke a long overdue public discussion about the interconnections between the "mission period" of Spanish conquest in the 18th century, the 19th century American genocide, the aftermath of land seizure, criminalization and enslavement of survivors, and 20th century "salvage archaeology."¹⁷

Today, the lineal descendants of the Verona Band of Alameda County and other Ohlone peoples in the Bay Area are asserting their right to federal tribal sovereignty and to reclaim their ancestral lands, cultural artifacts, and the remains of their dead that are among the nine thousand still held by the University.

We should take advantage of this un-naming opportunity to honor the people who made Kroeber's professional success possible, who lived here long before conquest and anthropology, and who are un-remembered in the university's landscape.

This issue of *The Asia-Pacific Journal* features one other important article on the anthropology and traveler observations of the indigenous in Sakhalin and their fate under empire. See Tessa Morris-Suzuki, “[Indigenous People Between Empires: Sakhalin Through the Eyes of Charles Henry Hawes.](#)”

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This essay is based on research on Kroeber done for [Grave Matters: Excavating California’s Buried Past](#) (Heyday, 2011); research being done currently in the Hearst Museum archives on the history of anthropology and archaeology at Berkeley; and discussions with his colleagues on the Berkeley Truth & Justice Project – Phenocia Bauerle, Carolyn Smith, and Seth Davis.

Notes

¹ Interview with Joy Sundberg, cited in Platt, *Grave Matters: Excavating California’s Buried Past*, Heyday, 2011, 46. See, also, Thomas Buckley, *Standing Ground: Yurok Indian Spirituality, 1850-1990*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002, 16.

² A. L. Kroeber, *Anthropology*, Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1923, 85; see, also, A. L. Kroeber, “[18 Professions](#),” *American Anthropologist*, 1915, 283-288.

³ Cited in Platt, *Grave Matters*, 44-45.

⁴ Kroeber, cited in Platt, *Grave Matters*, 48.

⁵ Cited in Platt, *Grave Matters*, 51.

⁶ Kroeber, “Yurok National Character,” 1971, cited in Platt, *Grave Matters*, 48.

⁷ Cited in Platt, *Grave Matters*, 160, 164.

⁸ See, generally, Platt, *Grave Matters*; Edward Winslow Gifford, “California Anthropometry,” *University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology*, 22, 2, 1926, 217-390; E. W. Gifford, “California Indian Physical Types,” (1926), in R. F. Heizer and M. A. Whipple, eds., *The California Indians: A Source Book*, University of California Press, 1971, 97-104.

⁹ Tony Platt, “The Yokayo Vs. The University of California: An Untold Story of Repatriation,” *News of Native California* 26, 2, Winter 2012-13: 9-14; Platt, *Grave Matters*, 128-141.

¹⁰ Orin Starn, *Ishi’s Brain: In Search of America’s Last “Wild” Indian*, W. W. Norton & Co., 2005; Douglas Cazaux Sackman, *Wild Men: Ishi and Kroeber in the Wilderness of Modern*

America, Oxford University Press, 2010.

¹¹ Kroeber, *Anthropology*, 323. A recent geoarchaeological study makes the case that there was “nearly 4,000 years of continuous occupation” in the area in and around Berkeley. See Christopher D. Dore, Stephen Bryne, Michal McFaul, and Garry L. Running IV, “Why Here? Settlement, Geoarchaeology, Paleoenvironment at the West Berkeley Site (CA-ALA-307),” *Proceedings of the Society for California Archaeology* 17, 2004, 27-33.

¹² “University of California: A Photographic Essay,” *Life*, October 25, 1948, 96.

¹³ Cited in Platt, *Grave Matters*, 46.

¹⁴ A. L. Kroeber, *Handbook of the Indians of California* (1925), Dover Publications, 1976, 464, 466. *Costanoan* was a generic term used by anthropologists to define Native groups living on the Pacific Coast from the San Francisco Bay Area to Point Sur. *Ohlone* is the preferred term today.

¹⁵ Alan Levanthal, Les Field, Hank Alvarez, and Rosemary Cambra, “The Ohlone Back From Extinction,” in Lowell John Beam, ed., *The Ohlone Past and Present*, Ballena Press, 1994, 298, 312.

¹⁶ Robert Lee and Tristan Ahtone, “Land-Grab Universities,” *High Country News*, April 2020.

¹⁷ The relationship between deaths attributed to so-called natural causes during the period of Spanish rule and deaths attributed to colonial massacres is explored in Tai S. Edwards and Paul Kelton, “Germs, Genocides, and America’s Indigenous Peoples,” *Journal of American History* 107, 1, June 2020, 52-76.