
Andrew GARRETT, *The Unnaming of Kroeber Hall: Language, Memory, and Indigenous California* (Cambridge Massachusetts, MIT Press, 2023, 472 p.)

In 2020, the UC Berkeley administration received a widely circulated and co-signed proposal expressing demands from Native Californians that the name Kroeber be removed from the anthropology building. After calling for public comments, the university rapidly approved the proposal, leaving open the possibility of renaming. The process raised far-reaching questions about how institutions such as universities and museums confront their colonial pasts, and how they balance historical relativity with current political demands. Andrew Garrett explores these issues in his detailed, thoughtful book.¹

I contributed a comment objecting to many of the complaints against Alfred Kroeber, a renowned scholar and founder of the anthropology department at Berkeley. He was accused of racism, of supporting white supremacy, and of subjecting the famous Indian refugee, Ishi, to “cruel and degrading” treatment. Given what I knew of Kroeber’s lifework, his many public criticisms of racist eugenics, his loyalty to the Native Californians who assisted him in his research (including Ishi, about whom I had written at some length), and his advocacy for tribal land rights, these accusations seemed very one-sided, like a prosecutorial brief. There were certainly things to criticize in the record of this man and his discipline: for example, his engagement in the once-routine practice of collecting skeletons from Native graves for research purposes; his lack of scholarly attention to colonial violence; and his blindness to culture change and inventive tribal survival. The judgment of “extinction” that Kroeber pronounced in the early 1900s for Bay Area tribes who today are struggling for recognition seemed to me a damaging mistake, but understandable, given decades of genocidal devastation.

My comment joined many others that were submitted to the university’s review committee. An overwhelming majority supported the name change. Although I thought the process unfair to Kroeber the man, I came to the same conclusion as Andrew Garrett. The symbolism of Kroeber’s name had, for understandable reasons, become ineradicably painful for

¹ This review is an expanded version of remarks made at an “Author Meets Critics” event sponsored by the Social Science Matrix,

University of California, Berkeley, 1/19/24 (I was a press reviewer for *The Unnaming of Kroeber Hall*.)

Native Californians. A change could honor their past struggles, cultural survival, and present agency.

My concluding paragraph now seems like liberal wishful thinking. But, despite my more pessimistic better judgment, I'm doubling down.

The current movement for changing names raises important questions about our differently positioned assessments of a shared, sometimes ugly history. In conclusion, I would like to urge that we not succumb to the blame games and scorched-earth moralism so prevalent in today's political culture. I have recommended above an attitude of "critical generosity," especially with respect to ambiguous legacies like that of Kroeber and cultural anthropology. This means, in the current context, renaming Kroeber Hall in a way that honors Native Californian resilience but that also finds ways to publicly recognize, and understand, the continuing contributions of [the building's] former namesake and his changed discipline. This kind of thoughtful, informed, critical commemoration would be especially appropriate in an educational institution. (7/20/20)

A similar sentiment was expressed in Professor Kent Lightfoot's opinion opposing the change (7/22/20), a nuanced account of Berkeley archaeology by someone known for his collaborations with Native California communities. I noticed it, also, in Professor Ron Hendel's critique of the similar un-naming of Barrows Hall.² We were hoping, perhaps, for some kind of exhibit or public discussion, a "teachable moment" that would recognize the positive contributions of these colonial liberals along with their failings, now magnified by "decolonial" better judgment. Perhaps our academic community could offer something more than a crude choice between condemnation or celebration. I didn't hold out much hope.

Yet Andrew Garrett has provided what I asked for: a "thoughtful, informed, critical commemoration" of Kroeber's life and work, of his changing disciplines, anthropology and linguistics, and of UC Berkeley's settler-colonial history. The book draws on its author's linguistic research with California Indians, on extensive archival work, and on published historical sources. (Its notes and bibliography together run to more than a hundred pages.) How will this richly documented, complex book be read, if it is read?

It will be understood by some (mostly, but not only, those on the political right) as a defense of Kroeber against ignorant, sanctimonious cancel culture. By others (largely on the Left), it will be seen as yet another whitewashing of settler colonialism and a defense of paternalistic

² The un-naming proposal and the many comments (archived by date) can be consulted at the website of the UC Berkeley Building Name Review Committee: [\[committees/building-name-review-committee\]\(https://chancellor.berkeley.edu/task-forces/administrative-committees/building-name-review-committee\). Hendel's opinion: <https://blogs.berkeley.edu/2020/07/29/on-un-naming-barrows-hall/>.](https://chancellor.berkeley.edu/task-forces/administrative-</p></div><div data-bbox=)

academic authority. However, the book rules out conclusions such as these, providing a multiperspectival realism that combines generous comprehension with critical, historical distance.

On his opening page, Garrett acknowledges the “dissonance” in which he finds himself. He is an engaged participant, not an objective outsider. Working happily in the extraordinary open archive of indigenous languages at Berkeley, he is brought up short by a Native language activist who tells him that she always feels “sick” on campus, conscious of all the ancestral bodies and artifacts stored there in boxes. Throughout his book, Garrett never forgets such Native responses, the anger and ambivalence that persists and that reflects deep colonial legacies at UC Berkeley.

At the end of Chapter One, he summarizes two contradictory versions of A. L. Kroeber’s legacy: one a history of harm, the other of generosity; one a narrative of colonial evasion and paternal dismissal, the other a story of alliance, respectful collaboration in the preservation of heritage. His book, Garrett writes, is an attempt to understand the “dissonance between these narratives,” both of which he takes seriously. While his account refutes particular claims, it doesn’t argue that one narrative is true and the other false. He allows different visions to cohabit uneasily, not seeking to reconcile them or to establish a balance. Throughout its eleven chapters, his book, in the words of Donna Haraway, “stays with the trouble.”³

In my perspective, this ability to lucidly inhabit the dissonance of irreconcilable stories is not ambiguity but rather realism. The many narratives called “historical” are overdetermined, contested, and unfinished. A single, smooth version can only be an ideological simplification. Multicontextual realism, while inevitably partial, sustains and works with disequilibrium and process.

In Garrett’s telling, Kroeber emerges in a positive light. His book leans that way—no doubt too much so for some. It is the work of a positioned observer, an heir to the Berkeley tradition of documentary linguistics. Garrett challenges many errors and oversimplifications in the brief against Kroeber. At the same time, Kroeber’s mistakes and omissions, as we now see them, are repeatedly acknowledged. For example, the book tracks Kroeber’s cultural “essentialism”: his search for cultural authenticity primarily in the past, his avoidance of historical invention and hybrid change. The anthropologist’s tendency not to focus his research on real contemporary people has been effectively stressed by

³ Donna HARAWAY, 2016. *Staying with the Trouble* (Durham, Duke University Press).

the Karuk writer and artist Julian Lang.⁴ It deflected Kroeber from the creative, impure cultural survival of tribes he believed to be vanishing.

Given the disasters visited on Native Californians after the Gold Rush, predictions of disappearance were not unreasonable early in Kroeber's career. But they also served settler interests, conceptually clearing the land of its prior occupants. Kroeber worked within and against this colonial context. In the 1950s, when he represented living California tribes in court, he was acting under changed assumptions, at a different historical moment. He died a decade before widespread "indigenous" resurgence in California and elsewhere became inescapable, a phenomenon he would surely have welcomed (though no doubt with characteristic caution and a suspicion of "politics").

Today the name Kroeber symbolizes the limits of colonial liberalism, the entitlements and omissions that accompany good intentions. It also represents, more positively, a legacy of research, collective and dialogical, whose consequences were, and still are, decolonizing. This tradition of linguistic documentation, described in three central chapters, undergirds Garrett's retrospective assessment.

As an academic, I appreciate his core argument that research matters, beyond the intentions of the researcher. At times, while evoking the practice of documentary linguistics, the book challenges nonspecialist readers with difficult linguistic data and technical arguments. We wrestle with unfamiliar languages up close, and follow the labor of description and translation sustained over five decades by Kroeber, his linguist colleagues, and his Native American collaborators (Robert Spott, Gilbert Natches, and Juan Dolores, along with many others). Working from unpublished notebooks and letters at the Bancroft Library, Garrett details the working relationships (and personal loyalties) that produced a rich archive, which is currently an important resource for indigenous renewal.⁵ Garrett's is the best work I know that explores the contradictions and unintended outcomes of what was long called "salvage" anthropology and linguistics.

Research matters, then, in more than objective ways. It is "historical" in the fullest sense, overdetermined and unfinished.

⁴ Julian LANG, 1991. "Introduction," in Lucy Thompson, ed., *To the American Indian* (Berkeley, Heyday Press).

⁵ The most recent instantiation of the Kroeber tradition is the (now-digitized) "California Language Archive," directed by Andrew Garrett. It extends work from the 1950s by Mary Haas and many others at

Berkeley. To browse its enormous range is revelatory [<https://cla.berkeley.edu>]. A related initiative, the "Breath of Life" language restoration workshop, founded by linguist Leanne Hinton, introduces Native community members to archival materials as sources for revitalization.

Garrett's evocation of an open-ended colonial archive rhymes with my own current interest in what I call, for lack of a better name, post-ethnographic museums. *The Unnaming of Kroeber Hall* also explores many important aspects of California history: the legacy of the Hearst family and its mining wealth, the importance of land in Indian languages and cosmologies, the contributions of Native intellectuals, the impact of settler-colonial institutions like UC Berkeley. I will, however, limit my remaining remarks to the sense of futurity I find in the book and in my museum research.

What futures for the collections of tribal materials currently found all over Europe, North America, Australia, and other imperial metropolises? Times are changing. Human remains and cultural artifacts held in these collections can no longer be considered the heritage of an abstract, imperial Mankind or a decontextualized science. Under pressure from former colonial subjects (activists, artists, Elders ...), specimens and artworks are in motion, reconceived as stories, unfinished histories, sources of knowledge to be reclaimed and made new.

In changing ethnographic museums, what was—even ten years ago—unmentionable, repatriation, is now everywhere on the agenda. Following, as best I can, these rapidly changing contexts, I haven't found a single, politically virtuous pathway to restitution but, rather, many specific, pragmatic negotiations. Radical decolonizing pressures (like the movement to purify Kroeber Hall) force institutions to grapple with their imperial legacies. This may be transformative or, as Garrett concludes in the Berkeley case, superficial and self-serving. There is, of course, institutional resistance: obstruction, delay, unwillingness to relinquish the authority of universalism, or the privilege of being at the end or cutting edge of history.

While nothing is guaranteed, what we can see in this uneven conjuncture (simplistically aligned by the word “decolonization”) is movement, inventive articulations of old and new, uneven and branching paths. We rediscover Hegel's “cunning” of reason: history's inevitable surprises, what happens behind our backs. In the present moment of indeterminacy, when so many trends seem reactionary, when enlightened progress is anything but assured, the reopening of colonial collections, like Kroeber's research legacy, offers a guardedly hopeful sense of direction.

A. L. Kroeber (1876–1960) was born at a moment of triumphant imperialism, and he died as its hegemony was unraveling. He lived in a world structured by colonization, with its depredations, assimilationist assumptions, and romantic myths. Within this still-unfinished history,

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with help from Garrett's book, we can respect a life committed to Native Californian languages and cultures. Kroeber believed these lifeways were doomed, but his work would be part of their future.

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