

A Critical Response to Dana Lloyd about A. L. Kroeber and her Yurok Problem

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Abstract

There's an old story emanating from anthropology's 'reflexive' period (ca. 1990–?). The ethnographer and their knowledge keeper (still referred to as an 'informant' in those days) were hard at work for the better part of a day when suddenly the indigenous person says to the other, 'that's very interesting. Now can we talk about me'?

Dana Lloyd wrote a lot about herself and her fears (Lloyd 2024) but she provided almost nothing about the people whose religion, ideas, and being were the putative objective of her proposed research. Perhaps readers will be interested in what she wrote about her own problems but she is wrong about the scholar who spent 60 years actually learning from the Yurok and many other indigenous peoples of California. She refers to 'the sins' of 'the infamous' Alfred Louis Kroeber and apparently accepts descriptions of him as a 'historical monster' (542). One would think that such a claim about a man who was the 'dean of American anthropology', who fought racism and ethnocentrism all his professional life, devoted 60 years to recording the languages, music, stories, arts, and cultural life of indigenous peoples of California, and was the beloved father of the respected (even beloved), award-winning writer Ursula LeGuin, would call for well-attested research into the matter. Unfortunately, this is not the case.

Speaking of the person known as Ishi, Lloyd wrote, 'There are stories about Kroeber's promises to Ishi's son, to throw Ishi a respectful funeral, promises he bluntly broke when he sent Ishi's brain to be studied' (2024: 542). I hope that all readers of this journal will realize that the major and defining aspect of the Ishi story is that he was totally without any relatives, all of whom had been killed or died of their travails while being hunted and hounded by white settlers. Ishi not only had no son to receive those promises, but Kroeber was in New York when Ishi died and sent imperative, even furious, instructions that there should be no autopsy at all (Starn 2003: 46–48; Sackman 2010: 278–80). The story of Ishi's autopsy is well-documented and widely known by those who read about the matter, but someone who believes that Ishi had a son cannot have paid attention to one of the best-known episodes in the long chronicle of the killing of North American Indians.

Lloyd is welcome to write about her life and concerns but she charges Kroeber in a distressing manner, writing of him in the darkest terms without offering any evidence at all. The author insinuates a reason when she writes:

What did Kroeber do that awarded him the status of a historical monster?

Kroeber wrote about northern California Indigenous peoples, their cultures

and lifeways, as ‘vanishing’, mentioning neither their genocide nor the federal policy that in his time was meant to erase those peoples from being. (2024: 542)

But this merely repeats a current cliché without understanding Kroeber’s role and importance to the indigenous peoples of California. The point of my response to her article is not only to rectify some of the affronts to the memory of Alfred Kroeber but to discuss this moment in our intellectual life, attempting to explain why such serious distortions of our history occur. These are distortions that lead to critical misunderstandings of where we were and where we are.

Anthropology Today and the Image of the Past

American anthropology has been undergoing a continual radical transformation since the late 1960s (for the earlier developments see Lewis 2009; for later, Lewis 2024). It is no longer the discipline that studies ‘the whole of the human condition: past, present, and future; biology, society, language, and culture’ (Kottak 2006: 3) or ‘the encompassing human science, the comparative study of the human condition’, as Marshall Sahlins (2017) called it. Our discipline grew out of lively curiosity about the world’s peoples, as well as an appreciation for scientific method. Since the 1960s, it has increasingly become ‘anthropology the revealer and righter of wrongs’ and anthropology the study of domination and the dominated. Two observers have characterized current developments in the field as ‘dark anthropology’ and ‘the suffering subject’.

This transformation began with the events of the late 1960s: the war in Vietnam, civil rights struggle and the rise of the women’s movement, identity-focused politics, and ‘sex, drugs, rock and roll’. With the addition of ‘trust no one over thirty!’ the anthropology of earlier days came to be seen by many in a negative light. The criticism never let up, from the idea that anthropologists were in league with colonial powers, that they regularly exoticized ‘the Other’ and ‘extracted’ information as though pulling teeth—but with trickery. With the addition of postmodernism and theories advanced from France following Foucault and his acolyte Edward Said (‘Orientalism’), writers of literary theory also found the adventures of a handful of famous ethnographers like Bronislaw Malinowski and E. E. Evans-Pritchard too much fun to ignore. Postcolonialism would join in and decolonization is the inevitable *sequelae*. *Critique of Anthropology* (a journal and a way of life) is a predominant exemplar of the genre. Anthropology’s past is literally (not figuratively) unknown territory despite the lively developing historiography of anthropology that is largely ignored. The prejudice against older works and workers has become so intense (even merciless) that facts, nuance, fairness, in other words, judicious scholarly analysis, is all too often absent. This is, it seems to me, to be relevant background to Dana Lloyd’s portrayal of A. L. Kroeber.

Responding to Lloyd on Kroeber

Lloyd claims that ‘Kroeber wrote about northern California Indigenous peoples, their cultures and lifeways, as “vanishing”, mentioning neither their genocide nor the federal policy that in his time was meant to erase those peoples from being’. When 25-year-old Alfred Louis Kroeber arrived in San Francisco in 1901 the indigenous population of California had declined to about 15,000 souls from perhaps 310,000 at the time of contact, first with the Spanish and then with ‘American’ settlers. Their numbers had declined so drastically that there was reasonable fear that the remaining small groups might actually ‘vanish’ altogether, but many of the remaining Indian groups and individuals had been removed from their original territory and were working for wages, losing their languages, had become Christian, etc. In other words, by 1900, Indian peoples and the knowledge of their rich cultures and arts were in danger of disappearing—almost without a trace. (See Madley 2016: 555, n. 2,3 and Lewis 2022 for amplification and references.)

Beginning in 1901, young Kroeber, trained and experienced as an ethnographer, took it upon himself to learn everything he could about California’s rapidly diminishing indigenous peoples: Yurok, Hupa, Mohave, Pomo, Maidu, Wintu, Yokuts, Yuma, Washo, and a half dozen others. He attempted to reconstruct the locations and place names, the use of environments, livelihoods, institutions, social organizations, ceremonies, beliefs, stories, language styles, material cultures, and the arts, that had been the distinctive lifeways of the indigenous people of California before the destruction, losses, and changes caused by the Spanish, the Catholic missions, Protestant missionaries, the gold rush miners, the settlers, the US government, and time itself. By 1917 he had prepared a 995 page volume filled with all he could learn by that time about 15 different groups: *Handbook of the Indians of California* (it wasn’t published until 1925; Kroeber 1925).¹ Jack Norton, the Hupa-Cherokee author of *Genocide in Northwestern California: When Our Worlds Cried*, is critical of the relative weakness of Kroeber’s statements, such as ‘the violent dispersal, disintegration, and wasting away of the suffering tribes subjected to the process’ (1979: 17). But Norton’s footnote on page 16 also acknowledges: ‘Much of the information concerning territorial possession has been gleaned from the Kroeber *Handbook of the Indians of California*...’. In fact, MOST of the information that the descendants of the indigenous people of California have about the locations, the names, the geography, and much of the early culture and history of their people comes from that book and from Kroeber’s dedication to research and publication between 1901 and 1976 (16 years after he died). Scholars and laypersons alike depend not only on his work but that of his many students and the other anthropologists he urged to study California’s native populations. These include Samuel A. Barrett, Roland B. Dixon, Pliny E. Goddard, Cora Du Bois, May Diaz, Ralph Beals, and a host of others.

¹ The book contains 419 illustrations, 40 maps, and 26 pages of bibliography, much of it annotated.

Here is Kroeber's explanation for the choice he made:

After some hesitation I have omitted all directly historical treatment in the ordinary sense; that is, accounts of the relations of the natives with the whites and of the events befalling them after such contact was established. It is not that this subject is unimportant or uninteresting, but that I am not in a position to treat it adequately. (1925: vi)

He points out that it would require 'a thorough knowledge of local history', of the institutions and archives of the Spanish missions and the U.S. federal and state governments, early California history, and so on.

In all these things many others are more proficient than I can hope to become; and it has seemed that I might better contribute to the future writing of such a history by concentrating effort in the field to which training and predilection have led me, and endeavoring to render the California Indians, as such, a more familiar object to the future historian of his political and economic relations with ourselves. (Kroeber 1925: vi)

By concentrating on what he knew how to do, Kroeber left an incomparable and vital body of knowledge that no one else at the time could have done. Jack Norton and everyone else depends on this work.

When Kroeber discussed population numbers, however, both historically and contemporaneously, he couldn't avoid mentioning the depredations and the killing, the land-grabbing and displacements of the Indians. His prose is sometimes elliptical, but he did employ such terms as 'slaughter', 'massacre', and 'warfare of extermination', as in the case of the Yahi, Ishi's people (1925: 341–46).

In footnote 3 Lloyd states, 'Kroeber has been criticized for his unethical treatment of the Native people he studied. See, for example, Baldy (2018) and Buckley (2002)'. The reader might wish to do their own research into what Baldy (2018) and Buckley (2002) wrote about Kroeber, but Dr. Lloyd doesn't ease their task by citing the relevant pages. For those who care, both Baldy and Buckley take issue with Kroeber for underestimating the importance of women's rituals and menstrual ceremonies. Writing with the wisdom of almost a century more work in cultural anthropology (Buckley) and from the perspective of newly awakened feminist and ethnic awareness, theory, and activism (Baldy) these two authors point out things that Kroeber did not understand about their special concerns. This is unfortunate ethnographic blindness, from a century before, but is it 'unethical treatment'? 'Immoral'? A reason to be labelled as an 'historical monster'?

Tim Buckley devoted most of his academic career to the study of the Yurok people and to following Kroeber's trail. He could be very critical of the old man (and of Kroeber's view of traditional culture) but he noted the importance of Kroeber's work for the reinvigoration of ceremonial life among the Yuroks and other groups.

Yet this cumulative salvage ethnography today provides those most actively engaged in ‘saving’ their own Yurok culture with a virtual textbook, however selectively it is consulted. Thus, as a Yurok elder dissenting from the majority Yurok opinion of ‘anthros’ once said to me: ‘Thank God for that good Doctor Kroeber and Doctor Waterman and Gifford and those other good white doctors from Berkeley who came up here to study us. If they hadn’t taken an interest in us and come up here and written it all down we wouldn’t know a thing today about who we really are’. (Buckley 1996: 293–94).

Dr. Lloyd writes:

When I ask Yurok people what they think about the books Kroeber wrote about them, they tell me how their elders would make up stories for him, because he paid them for those stories. The title of his book *Yurok Myths* (1978 [sic, 1976]) thus has an ironic dimension. (2024: 543)

Then she modestly concludes, ‘I realize that just as they didn’t need Kroeber to speak for them, they do not need me’. There is a lot to unpack in these sentences.

First of all, Kroeber didn’t speak *for* the Yurok but he wrote *about* them and their ‘land and civilization’, their towns and their names, kinship and social organization, law and customs, life crises, religion, dances, shamanism, calendar, mythology, and their arts and manufactures. Above all he described and recorded (in writing and with sound recordings) their language, their music, and their stories. *In their words!* And he recorded what he could for a dozen more Californian peoples beginning in 1901, a time when there apparently weren’t Yurok or other indigenous people in a position to do this for themselves. But when Lucy Thompson, a Yurok woman, published a book about her people in 1916, Kroeber greeted it enthusiastically. Here are his words:

In its exterior Mrs. Thompson’s work shows roughnesses. The style is without polish, the proof-reading inexperienced. General background is lacking. Inadequacies of this nature are likely to establish a prompt prejudice against the value of the subject matter. Such prejudice the reviewer wants very much to dispel. He has not only worked with the Yurok but lived with them, and finds it a pleasure to attest the definite scientific value of Mrs. Thompson’s pages. The accounts of house building, burial, several of the dances, wars and feuds, marriage customs, slavery, tobacco growing, to mention only a few of many points, contain much detail that is entirely new. (Kroeber 1921: 220; emphasis added)

.....

This book being as it were privately published, is likely not to reach libraries as extensively as it should, and once the edition has been disposed of to

those with local interests it is likely to become very difficult for public institutions to secure. It can be obtained for \$1.50 from the author at 1557 Myrtle Avenue, Eureka, California. It is a volume that should be available in every library that pretends to a complete record of American ethnology. (Kroeber 1921: 221; emphasis added)²

Robert Spott, a Yurok man born in 1888, grew up with a thorough Yurok education as well as one in the Hoopa Valley Indian School and battle in France with the United States army. Alfred Kroeber was well acquainted with his family and in time Robert became a writer in his own right, encouraged by his professor friend. The 120-page article of 1942, ‘Yurok Narratives’, carries Robert Spott’s name as the first author. The book, *Yurok Myths*, mentioned by Lloyd, contains dozens of stories narrated to Kroeber between 1900 and 1907 by 29 storytellers, all of whom he knew well. Because these were the creative works of individuals and not cut and dried Disney versions, of course the narrators made things up! The best storytellers do. But Kroeber knew the pattern of the culture and the important ideas that provided the background to the narratives. As an experienced ethnographer Kroeber would have had a good idea if some informants were making up nonsense. (It would not be unlikely for a rival or an honest soul to tell the ethnographer that they were being lied to. It is not as easy to lie to trained ethnographic fieldworkers as people think.)

As a result of Kroeber’s work and that of his students and colleagues, the native peoples of California today have access to thousands of recordings for the study of their languages as well as songs, narratives, ceremonials, and medical texts collected from their ancestors more than a century ago. Many of the ethnographers’ field notes are available for study, as are photographs of people, places, and activities. Much of this is online, there for language revival and artistic and spiritual inspiration.

A person who wants to read a nuanced and detailed account of the ‘unnaming’, including the accusations against Kroeber and the facts of both the case and Kroeber’s work, should see Andrew Garrett (2023), *The Unnaming of Kroeber Hall: Language, Memory, and Indigenous California*. From the publisher’s abstract:

In *The Unnaming of Kroeber Hall*, Andrew Garrett examines Kroeber’s work in the early twentieth century and his legacy today, asking how a vigorous opponent of racism and advocate for Indigenous rights in his own era became a symbol of his university’s failed relationships with Native communities. Garrett argues that Kroeber’s most important work has been overlooked: his collaborations with Indigenous people throughout California to record their languages and stories.³

² Today, this work can be accessed online thanks to Project Gutenberg. See Lowry 2019 for more on Lucy Thompson and her book.

³ In this book, Garrett also details evidence regarding Kroeber’s steadfast resistance to the racist determinism and belief in eugenics that was then prevalent in the United States and Europe. For a

In this commentary I have focused on what Dana Lloyd (2024) wrote about A. L. Kroeber. Once considered the ‘Dean’ of American anthropology, many today view him as a very bad man as a result of the attacks on his memory that took place during the unnamings of Kroeber Hall of the University of California, Berkeley.

While Dr. Lloyd seems to know very little about that once-honored figure, I surmise that her warrant for such intemperate remarks is derived from the intellectual climate of the moment in which the actual history of anthropology has been replaced with the fictions of a half century of ‘critique’. This enables her to publish a paper accusing him of ‘immoral treatment of American Indians’ (incidentally a *misquotation* of the headline she cites on page 542) and, essentially, of being a ‘historical monster’. The good news is that these calumnies about the terrible Dr. Kroeber are not true. The bad news is that such defamations are often believed. It is even worse that similar canards are accepted by some about the whole of American anthropology.

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shorter version than Garrett’s book, see the review of by N. J. Enfield (2023). As Enfield notes, ‘It is hard not to see a certain arrogance in those who were eager to accept claims that Kroeber was “racist” and “unethical” despite his prominent advocacy for California’s Native Americans.’ Enfield understands: ‘Kroeber and his collaborators produced resources of “incalculable value” that are “in continual use by Native communities and others today”. They recorded Native American songs and stories from the early twentieth century on wax phonograph cylinders. Today, century-old Indigenous Californian voices can be heard by their descendants in Native American communities. Kroeber both taught and embodied the intercultural tolerance that has long defined anthropology as a collaborative endeavour’.

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