Ishi’s brain, Ishi’s ashes

Anthropology and genocide

The following essay is a critical reflection by a member of the Department of Anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley, in response to demands by Native Californians for the repatriation of ancestral remains and sacred artefacts that are part of the permanent collections kept in the Hearst (formerly Lewis) Museum of Anthropology. After more than ten years under the 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), the US federal law that requires that all Native American human remains and sacred funeral objects be identified and repatriated to appropriately designated indigenous groups, to date only two small material objects have been returned from the vast collections at Berkeley.

The tensions between Native Californians and university officials and anthropologists came to a head in the late 1990s when Art Angell, a Maedi Indian activist, asked that the brain of ‘Ishi’, a famous California Indian, removed during autopsy at the University of California Medical Center in March 1916 (when he was under the special protection of Alfred Kroeber and the Department of Anthropology), be located and returned to Ishi’s culture. The descendants in the area of Mt. Lassen, along with his ashes which were kept in a Pueblo jar in a cemetery in Oakland, California. When it was discovered that A.L. Kroeber himself had sent the brain to be ‘curated’ at the Smithsonian Institution, I was asked to chair a small departmental committee to review the data and draft a formal statement of response by our department. As I became more involved I began to attend public hearings and to visit leaders of several Indian communities near Ishi country. What follows, then, is not a research report but a foray into engaged or public anthropology, critically applied work by the anthropologist speaking and acting as a citizen rather than as a specialist, though obviously informed by anthropological principles.

Invisible genocides

Modern anthropology was built up in the face of colonial and post-colonial genocides, ethnocide, population die-outs, and other forms of mass destruction visited on the ‘non-Western’ peoples whose lives, suffering and deaths provide the raw material for much of our work. Yet despite this history – and the privileged position of the ethnographer as eye-witess to some of these events – anthropology has been, until quite recently, relatively mute on the subject. Although predispoused by our training not to see the political or manifest forms of violence that so often ravage the lives of our subjects, anthropologists are some what better at analysing psychological (see Devereux 1986; Edgerton 1992; Schepers-Hughes 2000 [1979]) and symbolic forms of violence (see Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:111-265) that underlie so many ordinary human institutions and social interactions.

A basic premise guiding 20th-century ethnographic research was, quite simply, to see, hear, and report no evil after returning from the field. Classical anthropology orientees us like so many inverse bloodbaths on the trail of the good and the righteous in the societies we study. But this moral blinkers that we wore in one instance spilled over into a kind of hermeneutic generosity in other and less appropriate instances – for example, toward Western colonizers, police states, and other social and political institutions of mass violence.

Today the world, the objects of our study, and the axes of anthropology have changed considerably. Those privileged to observe human events close up and over time, who are thereby privy to local, community, and even state secrets that are generally hidden from view until much later, after the collective graves have been discovered and the body counts compiled, are beginning to recognize another ethical position – that of naming and identifying the sources, structures, and institutions of mass violence.

This new mood of political and ethical engagement has resulted in considerable soul-searching, even if long after the fact (see Geertz 1995).

Claude Lévi-Strauss (1995), for example, opened his recently published photographic memoir, Saudades do Brasil (Homesickness for Brazil), with a sobering caveat. He warned that the lyrically beautiful images of ‘pristine’ rainforest Brazilian Indians about to be presented – photos taken by him between 1935 and 1939 – should not be trusted. The images were illusory for the world they portray no longer exists. The images of starkly beautiful, seemingly timeless Namibkwaras, Caduveos, and Bororo bear no resemblance to the reduced populations one might find today camped out by the sides of busy truck routes or loitering in urban villages. The indigenous populations have been decimated by wage labour, gold prospecting,
1. Other Native Americans, such as the Iroquois of New York, have less intense passions invested in reputation and have even sometimes exhibited the capacity to make this topic remain that have been offered to them from museum collections.

2. I implicate myself in this scenario. I took me over two decades to confront the question of overt political violence which goes around the choice of early field sites—Ireland in the mid-1970s and Brazil during the military dictatorship years—must have required a massive dose of denial. While studying the madness of everyday life in the mid-1970s in a small, remote community in western Ireland, I was largely concerned with interior spaces, with the small dark psychodramas of scapegoating and labelling within traditional farm households that was driving so many young bachelors to drink and to depression and suicide. Consequently, I left unexamined until very recently (Schepel-Hughes, 2000) the links between the political violence in Northern Ireland and the tortured family dramas in West Kerry.


4. Kroeber wrote to Hofflick on 27 October 1916 ( Bancroft Library, Records of the Department and Museum of Anthropology, CU-23): ‘I find that with Isi’s death last spring, his brain was removed and preserved. There is no one here who can put it to scientific use. If you wish it, I would be pleased to deposit it in the National Museum collection.’ Hofflick replied on 12 December 1916 that he would be ‘very glad’ to receive the brain and he would have it ‘properly worked up.’ In another letter dated 20 December 1916 Hofflick gave precise directions for the preparation of the brain for shipping: ‘The brain should be packed in plenty of absorbent cotton saturated with the liquid in which it is preserved, and the whole should be enclosed in a piece of oiled cloth.’

Below, a letter dated 20 February 1917, the Curator of prostitution and the diseases of cultural contact—smallpox, TB, AIDS, syphilis. But the old master’s confession goes further. These early photos capturing simple, naked Indians sleeping on the ground under shelters of palm leaves have nothing to do (he now says) with a state of pristine humanity that has since been lost. The 1930s photos already show the effects of a savage European colonization on the once populous civilizations of Central Brazil and the Amazon. Following contact these civilizations were destroyed, leaving behind a people not so much ‘primitive’ as ‘stranded’, stripped of their material and symbolic wealth. Lévi-Strauss’s camera had captured images of an ‘invisible genocide’ (see Schepel-Hughes 1996), of the magnitude of which the anthropologist was at the time unaware.

Earlier, Lévi-Strauss (1966:126) had described the quandary that demands that anthropology be a ‘vocation’ (see also Sontag 1964:68-81) rather than just a scholarly pursuit: ‘Anthropology is not a dispassionate science like astronomy, which springs from the contemplation of things at a distance. It is the outcome of a historical process which has made the larger part of mankind subservient to the other, and during which millions of innocent human beings have had their resources plundered and their institutions and beliefs destroyed whilst they themselves were ruthlessly killed, thrown into bondage, and contaminated by diseases they were unable to resist. Anthropology is the daughter to this era of violence.’

His statement is an indictment of those anthropologists who served as bystanders, silent and useless witnesses to the genocides and die-outs they encountered in the course of pursuing their science.

Kroeber and Isi: Last of their tribes

Alfred Kroeber, however, died before he could imagine a radically different role for the anthropologist as engaged witness rather than disinterested spectator to scenes of cultural destruction and genocide. When Kroeber arrived in San Francisco in 1901 to take up the post of museum anthropologist at the University of California it was at the tail-end of a horrendous, wanton, and officially sanctioned extermination of Northern California Indians that began during the Gold Rush and culminated in the early decades of the 20th century, during which the native population of California experienced a 90 per cent reduction of their pre-contact numbers.

The die-out was the cumulative result of disease epidemics, military campaigns, massacres, bounty hunts, debt peonage, child kidnapping, land grabbing and enclosures by the Anglo settlers that began during the California Gold Rush in the mid-19th century and lasted through the first decades of the 20th century (see Castillo 1978, Churchill

FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS,...

resourceful Indians of the Stone Age culture lived in Northern California People of the Yahi tribe hunted and fished in this immediate area. Speaking a different dialect from their Yana neighbors, the Yahi kept to themselves except for trading and occasional raids. Acorn gathering was an important occupation, and the Yahi—like most Northern California Indians—were skilled basket weavers. In the early 1800’s, beaver-trapping mountain men explored these mountain ranges. Earlier, Spanish had stayed mainly in the Upper Sacramento Valley—which they divided into huge ranchos. Peter Lassen, a Danish-born blacksmith, gained title to one of these holdings in 1844. A few years later, he pioneered a wagon road across the Sierra Traces of another early route—founded by William Nobles—still twist across parts of the present-day park. Thousands of gold seekers and settlers rolled into Northern California along these early highways. Tragically, the Indians who did not hide in the back country were displaced or killed. Much of the isolated Lassen Area remained sparsely settled. However, in 1907, Lassen Peak and Cinder Cone were set aside as National Monuments. Then, in 1914, Lassen Peak began a series of eruptions that culminated in a tremendous explosion in May 1915. Nationwide interest helped establish Lassen Volcanic National Park in 1916. The small, out-of-the-way park struggled for life and growth. Present-day emphasis is directed toward care and preservation of the park’s irreplaceable recreational; scenic and wilderness area.
the Museum of Anthropology at the University of California, confirmed the tradition: ‘Ishi’s brain was sent to the National Museum in a gift box as a compliment of the University of California... If you will entrust the donor as the Department of Anthropology of said University, I think your record will be as accurate as you can make it.’

5. William Kiffon, the archaeologist and director of the Smithsonian Institution’s repatriation program, was extremely helpful to various leaders of California tribes once the Smithsonian decided (after an initial delay) that it did have the brain. Kiffon and his committee designated the Pit River tribe of Redding, California, over the Yahi of Enterprise Rancheria, who made the initial claim for Ishi’s brain, on the grounds of greater linguistic affiliations between the Pit River and the ‘disappeared’ Yahi. The ceremonial burial of the brain that took place at the Smithsonian and the ritual events surrounding the burial of Ishi’s brain and his ashes (and the location of the burial site) remain secret, at the request of the Northern California Indians.


tation suffered by the Maiduan community of Northern California is illustrative of a general pattern of invisible genocide. In 1850 there were between 3,500 and 4,500. By 1910 (there were) only 500 Maidau people remaining (Riddell 1978: 386). The ethnologies continue to this day, though in different forms, the toll exacted from genera-
tions of structural violence — poverty, racism, social exclusion and geopolitical displacement, chronic unemploy-
ment, ill health and social disorganization resulting from alcohol and drug addictions.

Kroeber, like most anthropologists of his day, dedicated himself early on to what was then called ‘salvage ethnog-
raphy’ — an attempt to document the cultures of rapidly disappearing indigenous peoples. R. Firth in American anthropolo-
yraphy’s weak response to genocide, although it was never explicitly recognized as such. But by the time

Kroeber completed his monumental Handbook of the Indians of California in 1917 he had come to view salvage ethnog-
raphy as an appropriate means of gathering the remnants from survivors in blue-jeans living in ruined and ‘basantadized’ cultures (Kroeber 1948: 427) — as less than satisfying work, and he took up more theoretical writings focusing on the collective ‘genius’ of a given cultural tradi-
tion to which the individual was largely irrelevant. Kroeber saw the destruction of entire small populations of Natives as a side-bar in the longue durée of social evolu-
tionary time. He once described the genocide which reduced the indigenous population of California from

300,000 in the mid-1840s to less than 20,000 people at the close of the century as a thing of small import, ‘a little his-
tory... of pitiful events’ (Buckley 1996).

Perhaps confronting the suffering, devastation, and cul-

tural loss of his Yaquis and Yahi informants was too dif-
ficult for Kroeber to bear and he retreated into the safety

zone of an abstract theory that put their losses into a broader cultural historical perspective. Kroeber admitted to an ‘unusual personal resistance’ to ‘vehement emo-
tion’, and he once confided to A. R. Pilling, another spe-
cialist in Yurok ethnography, that he did not delve into his informants’ experiences of the contact era because he ‘could not stand all the tears’ (Buckley 1996: 277). Moreover, he did not consider the Native California geno-
cide an appropriate scientific topic to enquire into. After some hesitation’, Kroeber wrote in 1925, ‘I have omitted all
directly historical treatment... of the relations of the natives with the whites and of the events betafiding them after such contact was established. It is not that this subject is unimportant or uninteresting, but that I am not in a posi-
tion to treat it adequately. It is also a matter that has com-
paratively slight relation to aboriginal civilization’ (cited by Buckley 1996: 274). Vanquished peoples could cast
court light on the ‘authentic’ aboriginal civilizations that preceded them, which Kroeber viewed as the true subject of
his discipline.

Kroeber’s retreat into theory may alternately have expressed his deep faith in science (see Kroeber 1947: 22-
24). But, like Freud who made a similar move away from the social reality of his women patients in favour of a general theory of the unconscious (see Masson 1984), Kroeber’s turning away from the suffering of his living informants in favour of a general theory of culture history that ‘had no people in it’ (see Wolf 1981) could be seen as a betrayal.

This much is certain. The arrival of the Yahi Indian, Ishi, into Kroeber’s life and therefore into our anthropo-
logical and historical consciousness was uncannily over-
determined. In the first of two pieces that Kroeber (1911a and b) wrote about the Yahi Indians in the summer of
1911, he described the ‘discovery’ in 1908 by California surveyors of a rag-tag band of Mill Creek Indian survivors. The surveyors came upon a clearly concealed camp site,

now believed to be the last hiding place of Ishi and his few remaining family members. After frightening the Indians away the surveyors carried off all the blankets, tools, bows, arrows, and other supplies from the Yahi encamp-
ment. (These ‘artefacts’ are still ‘house’ in the Hearst Museum of Anthropology). Ishi’s state of near starvation when he was later captured may have resulted from the confiscation of his tools of subsistence.

Writing for popular consumption and supporting the lesser of two evils — death being the other alternative —
Kroeber argued for the capture of the Mill Creek Indians by a posse of US soldiers and their integration with the Kroeber and other local and visiting anthropologists for many years as scattered outcasts on the fringes of civilization’. Otherwise, the future was grim: ‘If the Indians are ever
called in the act of marauding it may go hard with them, for the ranchers in these districts rarely has his rifle far from
his hand and can scarcely be blamed for retorting to vio-
lence [italics supplied] when his belongings have been
repeatedly seized’ (p.8).

Then, on 29 August 1911, the last living member of that Yahi Mill Creek band, the man that Kroeber would later call ‘Ishi’ (the Yahi word for ‘human’), appeared in Oroville, California. Possibly driven by hunger and des-
peration, the Indian emerged from hiding in the foothills of Mt. Lassen and was discovered cowering in the corner of a slaughterhouse. He was held at the local jail until Kroeber and a young linguist, Tom Waterman, were sum-
moned and they identified him as a Yahi Indian. Ishi was
cold, frightened and hungry, but he refused to accept food
or water. In the first photo taken just hours after his cap-
ture, Ishi seemed startled and was in a state of advanced emaciation. His hair was clipped or singed close to his
head in a traditional sign of Yahi mourning. His cheeks
clung fast to the bones and accentuate his deep-set eyes.
The photo shows a man of intelligence and of deep sorrow.

After Ishi’s ‘rescue’ by Kroeber, he lived out his final
years (1911-1915) as a salaried assistant janitor, key
informant and ‘living specimen’ at the Museum of
Anthropology at the University of California, then located in
San Francisco near the medical school. Ishi was given
his own private quarters, but his room was located next to
a large collection of human skulls and bones that
depressed him. Nonetheless, Ishi conveyed to his anthropo-
logical and medical ‘guardians’ that he wished to remain
at the museum rather than face uncertainty else-
where. He could not go home: his territory was occupied
by the ghosts and spirits of his kin who had not died a
peaceful death nor been given a proper funeral.

During the period that Ishi lived among whites (doctors
and anthropologists), he served as a willing informant to
Kroeber and other local and visiting anthropologists,
including Edward Sapir whom Waterman accused of over-
working Ishi, already weak from illness. Like other ‘first
contact’ peoples, Ishi contracted tuberculosis, an urban

Bounty hunters (see front cover caption on page 3).
disease, although his condition was not diagnosed until the final weeks of his life. Kroeber feared this outcome, as his first wife, Henriette, was killed by the same disease two years after Ishi arrived at the Museum. Ishi succumbed in March 1916 while Kroeber was away in New York City on sabbatical leave.

Ishi has been described as northern California’s Anne Frank. Cruelly hunted, his group was reduced to five, then to three, and finally to one when Ishi was discovered and captured. Some local Indians speculate that Ishi may have been in search of refuge at the nearby Feather River (Maidu Indian) rancheria. The Maidu were known to offer sanctuary to escaping Yahi. ‘Ishi wasn’t crazy,’ Art Angle, head of the Butte County Native American Cultural Committee in Oroville, told me. ‘He knew where he was headed.’ But, betrayed by barking guard dogs, Ishi fell into the hands of whites instead. One Pit River man thought that Ishi had perhaps lost his bearings. ‘Too many years alone,’ others said. ‘Ishi didn’t really trust anyone – white or Indian.’

The unlettered Ishi did not (like Anne Frank) write his own diary, but he told some parts of his life story to Alfred Kroeber, who recorded these fragments by hand and captured Ishi’s rendition of Yahi myths, origin stories, and folktales on primitive wax cylinders, many of which have since melted. However, Ishi refused to talk about the death of his relatives and his last years of solitary hiding around Deer Creek. In the second of two popular articles on the Yahi, Kroeber described Ishi’s arrival in San Francisco on Labor Day in 1911. ‘Ishi was a curious and pathetic figure in those [first] days. Timid, gentle, an almost ever-pervading fear… concealed to the best of his ability, he starved and leaped at the slightest sudden sound. A new sight, or the crowding around of half a dozen people, made his limbs rigid. If his hand had been held and was released, his arm remained frozen in the air for several minutes. The first boom from a cannon fired in the artillery practice at the Presidio several miles away, raised him a foot from his chair… His one great dread, which he overcame but slowly, was of crowds. It is not hard to understand this in light of his lonely life in a tribe of five.’

Above: Kroeber and Ishi, 1911. ‘For a time I believed that he was unhappy, but when Barlow asked him if he would rather live with the white men or the Indians he said he preferred to stay where he was.’ A.L. Kroeber (From: R.F. Heizer and T. Kroeber 1970, Ishi the last Yahi: A documentary history. Berkeley: University of California Press).


Below: Ishi in his own country in 1914.
In this passage Kroeber describes what would today be considered the clinical symptoms of PTSD, post-traumatic stress disorder. Ishi's startling reflex, his phobias, his mobilization for flight are similar to the symptoms reported by many victims of sustained terror and warfare (see Herman 1992). Yet despite Ishi's physical and psychological vulnerability and his fear of crowds, Kroeber allowed Ishi to perform as a living exhibit at the Museum of Anthropology and at the San Francisco Panama-Pacific Trade Exhibition.

When Kroeber left for a sabbatical year in New York City he suspected that Ishi was gravely ill and that this might be his final leave-taking. When his worst fears were confirmed by a letter from Dr. Saxton Pope that Ishi was dying, Kroeber sent urgent telegrams demanding timely postings on his friend's deteriorating condition. He also demanded that Ishi's body be treated respectfully and according to the Indian's request to be cremated intact. 'If there is any talk about the interests of science,' Kroeber wrote in a letter to Clifford dated 24 March 1916, 'say for me that science can go to hell.' But with Kroeber far away, a standard autopsy was performed on Ishi's body during which his brain was removed 'for science'.

By the time Kroeber returned to Berkeley his view had cooled considerably. He even arranged for Ishi's brain to be packaged and shipped to the Smithsonian and to the care of Ales Hrdlicka, a physical anthropologist of the 'old school' dedicated to collecting and measuring brain 'specimens' from various orders of primates and human 'extincts'. Why Kroeber made such an about-face can only be speculated. Perhaps he thought that it was too late for 'sentimental' reservations. Ishi was dead and the damage to his body was irreversible.

Or perhaps — and to my mind this is the most probable explanation — Kroeber's behaviour is an act of disordered mourning. Grief can be expressed in a myriad of inchoate and displaced ways ranging from denial and avoidance, as in the Yahi taboo on speaking the names of the dead, to the insistence that the death and loss experienced is a minor one (see Scheg-Hughes, 1992, on 'death without weeping' among Brazilian shantytown mothers), to the glee and ruge of the Ilonget headhunter intent on getting an enemy's head to 'kill' the loss experienced on the death of a loved one, as described by Rosaldo (1989).

Freud's (1957) classic essay on 'mourning and melancholia' certainly comes to mind with respect to Kroeber's own 'swallowed grief' following the deaths of his first wife and then, soon afterwards, of his friend and key informant, Ishi, both from the same disease. Added to this was the disturbing impact of World War I on a German-American who was certainly sensitive to how the war might influence others' interpretation of his work. Support for the depression and mourning thesis comes from Kroeber's second wife, Theodora Kroeber (1970: 87), who gives an account of her husband's long period of depression and self-doubt between 1915-1922. A.L. Kroeber himself characterized this unsettling period in his mid-life as a 'hegira' — a dark period of journey, soul-searching and melancholia. The depression was marked by severe psychosomatic symptoms that led to a period of psychoanalysis in New York City, following which Kroeber became a practising psychotherapist himself for a few years, taking a leave of absence from teaching.

Consequently, Kroeber did not write the definitive history of Ishi and his people. After Ishi's death, Kroeber generally avoided talking about him. In her biography, Theodora Kroeber writes that the subject of Ishi caused Alfred considerable psychological pain and so was generally avoided in the Kroeber household. Perhaps Kroeber was observing the Yahi custom that forbade naming and speaking of the dead. I like to think so. But many years later Kroeber allowed Theodora to use him as a key informant on Ishi's last years. And so it was Theodora who told the story that her husband could not bear to write.

Alternatively, Kroeber may have sent Ishi's brain for 'work-up' at the Smithsonian because he believed that the science of anthropology to which he had dedicated his life might benefit from the tragedy of his friend's death. If so, it was a triumph of science over sentiment. Kroeber was not totally naive. In fact, he had been through a similar situation when, as a 21-year-old neophyte student of Franz Boas at Columbia University, he was given full responsibility for ethnographic and linguistic work-up on a small party of captive Eskimos brought to Boas by the Arctic explorer Robert Peary. When one of the Eskimo adults died of tuberculosis, members of his group were brought to mourn before a traditional earth mound that covered a counterfeit corpse made from a log. Without telling his
indigenous mourners, the real body of the Eskimo ‘specimen’ had been immediately whisked away to Bellevue Hospital’s College of Physicians and Surgeons for autopsy and study (see Thomas 2000: 77). But there is no evidence that the results of Ishi’s autopsy (see Pope 1920) or his severed brain were ever included in any scientific study. The brain was simply forgotten and abandoned in a Smithsonian warehouse.

Art Angle kept alive his family’s ‘folklore’ about Ishi’s remains. And in the mid-1990s he decided to pursue the case, locate the brain, and return it, together with Ishi’s cremated ashes, to Mt. Lassen for reburial. Angle enlisted the help of other tribal leaders and the skills of Nancy Rockafellar, a UCSF medical historian, and Orrin Starn, a cultural anthropologist from Duke University. It was Starn who located the valuable correspondence in the Bancroft Collection at UC Berkeley that confirmed the transactions between Kroeber and Hrdlicka.

It is easy today, with the advantage of hindsight, to identify the blind spots of our anthropological predecessors, including Kroeber’s failure to recognize the ongoing genocide of Indians in northern California, or to deal morehumanely with Ishi. Is it fair to ask what Kroeber might have done differently? What options did he have? Before Ishi became mortally ill Kroeber had broached the topic of where Ishi had been headed when he was caught on the run? If it was indeed to find sanctuary among related Native peoples, might that have been a possible solution? After Ishi’s health began to fail, were the museum and hospital the best places for him? To this day there is a strong investment in believing that Ishi was a happy man who enjoyed his life among his white friends and was content in his roles of museum janitor and Sunday exhibit. Perhaps he was. But the evidence (see especially Heizer and T. Kroeber 1979) suggests another interpretation — that Ishi was simply at the end of his existential rope. The Museum of Anthropology was his end of the line. Though not of his choosing, Ishi accepted his final destiny with patience, good humour and grace. He was exceptionally learned in the art of waiting.

Ishi’s brain

The final chapter of this story opened in the spring of 1999 with the rediscovery of Ishi’s brain. Anthropologists at Berkeley differed in their opinions of what, if anything, should be said or done. Some were embittered by the initial denial by the Hearst Museum of Anthropology and the UC administration. An official letter from the University to Art Angle stated: ‘There is no historical support for the idea that his brain was maintained as a scientific specimen.’ Following the official news release indicating that Ishi’s brain had, indeed, been traced to the Smithsonian, a departmental meeting was held and a proposed statement was debated, many times revised, and finally accepted as the collective response of the Department of Anthropology at Berkeley. While falling short of the apology to Northern California Indians that a majority of the faculty had signed in an earlier draft, the final unanimous statement read:

The recent recovery of a famous California Indian’s brain from a Smithsonian warehouse has led the Department of Anthropology at the University of California Berkeley to revisit and reflect on a troubling chapter of our history. Ishi, whose family and cultural group, the Yahi Indians, were murdered as part of the genocide that characterized the influx of western settlers to California, lived out his last years at the original museum of anthropology at the University of California. He served as an informant to one of our department’s founding members, Alfred Kroeber, as well as to other local and visiting ethnographers. The nature of the relationships between Ishi and the anthropologists and linguists who worked with him for some five years at the museum were complex and contradictory. Despite Kroeber’s lifelong devotion to California Indians and his friendship with Ishi, he failed in his efforts to honor Ishi’s wishes not to be autopsied and he inexplicably arranged for Ishi’s brain to be shipped to and to be curated at the Smithsonian. We acknowledge our department’s role in what happened to Ishi, a man who had already lost all that was dear
to him. We strongly urge that the process of returning Ishi’s brain to appropriate Native American representatives be speedily accomplished. We are considering various ways to pay honor and respect to Ishi’s memory. We regard public participation as a necessary component of these discussions and in particular we invite the peoples of Native California to instruct us in how we may better serve the needs of their communities through our research related activities. Perhaps, working together, we can ensure that the next millennium will represent a new era in the relationship between indigenous peoples, anthropologists, and the public.

I read the full statement, including the original apology — “We are sorry for our department’s role, however unintentional, in the final betrayal of Ishi, a man who had already lost all that was dear to him at the hands of Western colonizers and we recognize that the exploitation and betrayal of Native Americans is still commonplace in American society” — into the record of the California state legislature repatriation hearings held in Sacramento, California on 5 April 1999.

Some Indian leaders who were present accepted the apology, seeing it as a ‘big step’ for anthropology and for the University of California. Others dismissed the apology as ‘too little and too late’. Obviously, the mistrust between Native Americans and anthropologists founded in the history of genocide (and genocide ignored) requires more than an apology or a scholarly conference to honour Ishi. But the return of Ishi’s brain from the Smithsonian to representatives of the Pit River tribe on 8 August 2000, and the two-day celebration at Summit Lake on Mt. Lassen — communal feasting and healing dancing — a few weeks after the secret burial, represented an essential first step toward more constructive engagement between anthropologists and the survivors of California’s genocides. At one of the ‘talking circle’ events, Alfred Kroeber was forgiven.

Getting over — Writing against genocide

The recent critiques of anthropology have released a torrent of institutional and professional self-analysis. It is one thing to rethink one’s basic epistemology; it is quite another to rethink one’s way of being and acting in the world. Anthropologists have been asked to transform our central and defining practice of fieldwork, to de-colonize ourselves and to imagine new relations to our subjects. The relations with key informants we once thought of as our ‘friends’ or ‘good companions’ we now see as often tinged with professional opportunism and shot through with imbalances of power.

Yet the gift of the ethnographer remains — as in Kroeber’s day — some combination of eye-witnessing, thick description and cross-cultural insight, even if the rules of how to behave among peoples who are on the verge of extermination remain unwritten. What kinds of ‘participant-observation’ and what sort of eye-witnessing are adequate to scenes of genocide and its aftermath? At what point does the anthropologist-as-witness become a bystander or a co-conspirator?

In the end, what can be said about Kroeber and the man called Ishi? Not all Native Californians spoke well of Ishi, especially in years past. Some resented the fact that he accepted sanctuary with whites and the ‘anthros’. Young people, in particular, were quick to judge him. But as they grew older they began to imagine how they themselves might behave in similar circumstances. And today they recognize in Ishi one way of surviving a holo-caust. ‘We need to think in a good way now and to find ways to honour our grandfather Ishi.’ Anthropologists also need to ‘think in a good way’ now. We also need to respect our ancestors, including ‘grandfather’ Kroeber, recognizing that it is not always clear what is required at particularly fraught historical moments. Perhaps we all need to apologize and forgive each other as we once again go about reinventing anthropology as a tool and practice of human freedom.