

# Looking for Ishi: Insurgent Movements through the Yahi Landscape

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## In memory of Christopher August

*who recently passed away. He was excited about meeting all of you and so, with great appreciation for his work, we include his last contribution to research.*

## Abstract

In 1911 a Yahi man wandered out of the Northern California landscape and into the twentieth century. He was immediately collected and installed at the just opened Anthropology Museum by Alfred Kroeber at the University of California's Parnassus Heights campus. Dedication invitations came from the U.C. Regents led by Phoebe Apperson Hearst. Maintaining the discretion of his indigenous culture this man would not divulge his name. Kroeber named him Ishi, the Yahi word for man.

These assembled facts introduce narrative streams that continue to unfold around us. To examine these contingent individuals, events and institutions collectively labeled Ishi myth is to examine our own position, our horizon.

*Looking for Ishi* is a series of interventions and appropriations of Ishi myth involving video installation, looping DVD, encrypted motion images, web work, streaming video, print objects, written and spoken word, and documentation of the author's own insurgent movements through the Yahi landscape.

*[The following is a summary of an art, writing, and media project in progress.]*

**Keywords** : Ishi, canon, insurgent, media, institutions

## Ishi

In 1911 a Yahi man wandered out of the Northern California landscape and into the twentieth century. He was immediately collected and installed at the just opened Anthropology Museum by Alfred Kroeber at the University of California's Parnassus Heights campus. Dedication invitations came from the U.C. Regents led by Phoebe Apperson Hearst. Maintaining the discretion of his indigenous culture this man would not divulge his name. Kroeber named him Ishi, the Yahi word for man.

These assembled facts introduce narrative streams that continue to unfold around us. To examine these contingent individuals, events and institutions collectively labeled Ishi myth is to examine our own position, our own horizon. This landscape you and I stand in is a troubled and uneven one. History per-

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formed, recorded, and defended canonically frames a faulty contemporary worldview. If our history in Western North America is learned as the story of manifest destiny, indomitable pioneer spirit and the overcoming of hardship on the frontier when it is really a story of conquest and occupation then it may help to explain why collectively we are unable to identify and deal construc-

tively with issues of conquest and occupation in the world today.

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The best selling book ever published by the University of California Press is Theodora Kroeber's *Ishi In Two Worlds*. It appeared in 1961, a year after her husband Alfred's death. It is due to this account most of us learn something about the man Alfred named Ishi. Not an objective scholarly work, Theodora tells a story gently and reverently thereby insuring the preservation of memory and making a narrative concrete. She also insured that knowledge became myth.

Two works share the title *Ishi the Last Yahi*. Robert Heizer, with Theodora Kroeber compiled a documentary history that was published in 1979. Jed Riffe and Pamela Roberts produced and directed a documentary film that first aired on U.S. public television's *The American Experience* in 1992. Redolent with themes originating in salvage anthropology these accumulated narratives reinforce the myth of the vanished *indian*. It is the question of what story was framed, by what agency the teller did the framing, and what is missing from the frame that is the ore of this sustained irony.

Looking for Ishi – Alfred Kroeber was looking for Ishi. So too were the vigilantes who committed murder, mayhem, and terror in the Yahi landscape fifty years earlier. All were moving with an imperative that blinded them to the possibility of pluralism, establishing their presence, colonizing and working fields real and virtual, extracting from the Native other. Columbus, too, in a way was looking for Ishi. In the name of the Spanish crown he famously misdiscovered the *indian* and offered a vision and a methodology for extraction that continues to define us.

This little problem with the canon took a turn into the light a few years ago when descendents of tribal neighbors of the Yahi worked to repatriate Ishi's remains. Under the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) they obtained the urn containing his ashes but there was one little thing missing - his brain. Where was the brain that had been removed during the autopsy conducted in violation of the deceased's explicit request? Theodora reported Alfred's protests against the autopsy in 1916 but not about the disposition of the matter.

Anthropologist Orin Starn of Duke University eventually helped solve the mystery, unearthing the 1917 Berkeley letter from Kroeber offering the brain to the Smithsonian. And so armed the tribal authorities were able to successfully inter the united remains in the heart of Yahi territory.

This matter of the brain introduces more than a touch of grey into the myth of Alfred's paternal attitude towards his creation and our reappraisal of Theodora's interest in honoring the memory of her late husband. Titles such as *Ishi The Last Yahi* reinforce the dominant culture's preference to view the presence of the Native other as an *indian* past while honoring the noble myth of the salvage anthropologist.

What kind of film would Jed Riffe make today if he understood Alfred Kroeber's objectification of the man he collected and named? We have a chance to find out, he and Orin Starn are collaborating on a film reflecting on these and other matters. And how will the book being completed by Kroeber's sons reflect this new understanding?

To be sure, reading Stinnett on FDR and Pearl Harbor or Ellsberg on the prosecution of the Vietnam War tells us there are other more serious examples of the obstruction of public understanding for purposes of one policy or another. But that's the point, in predictable ways knowledge is selectively developed, blessed, and disseminated by powerful institutions. Will we need to wait fifty years to actually understand the dynamics of our contemporary global position? We can now see the faults in the writing of our own history. Is our present horizon tragically crippled by forces shaping an image of the world designed to reinforce public acceptance of unsustainable practices? Henry Kissinger was recently ap-

pointed to chair the U.S. Senate committee looking into the September 11, 2001 tragedy. Does he truly represent the epitome of constitutional observance of truth for the public good or is he the face of an apparatus of capture?

While it is clear that the reader produces meaning, attempting to argue which carries more power, the author or the reader, is pointless, as one cannot exist without the other. Furthermore, the roles of author, work, text and reader can be reversed or interchanged in history and culture. Since meaning is a product of contextualization the performative act of interpretation gains momentum as the reader's horizon of understanding widens. Perhaps it is more constructive to consider in what context ascendancy is gained or meaning is revealed by effort applied at either end of the author/reader continuum. It is certainly useful to consider how reception theory can be applied in the production of truth in the sciences.

In studying the myth of the North American indigenous group the Yahi authorship shifts between the observed and the observer, from the text to the author. At first the Yahi people themselves exist as a unit occupying space and time as they produce their lives and their culture. In this context they can be considered as author and work. Later, when forces carried by the momentum of the New World's newly canonized order have conspired in their doom they become the focus of scholarly study, they become text, they become objectified - and virtually extinct.

Enlightened scholarship and the canon embodied in the esteemed anthropologist Alfred Kroeber function as reader and text producer and the text itself. Before the man later called Ishi appears Kroeber and his associates labor to establish an institution, the Department of Anthropology of the University of California, where they work to collect and assess what can be salvaged from the remnants of indigenous cultures in North America's West. In 1911, when Ishi emerges to begin the reordering of assumptions about his people's supposed extinction, he reasserts Yahi authorship.

Coincidence and irony accumulate here as Ishi is installed at the Anthropology Museum in San Francisco. Funded through the generosity of patrons like Phoebe Apperson Hearst, a month after Ishi arrives Kroeber presides over the dedication of a new Museum of Anthropology wherein Ishi is installed. At the opening reception Ishi takes on the role of reader, observing this exotic culture and meeting distinguished guests, memorizing their names while protecting his own (Kroeber, 1961, p.134, 135).

Mrs. Hearst's family has played and continues to play a significant role in the exploitation of the West while providing multiple endowments to the University of California. Guided by her son William Randolph Hearst, the Hearst family established a continuing and prominent role in media business and culture while exploiting vast acreage in Northern and Central America, including what had been prime Salinan, Essalen, and Chumash land at San Simeon, California. Coincidentally, the Chumash share Hokan language roots with the Yahi. Through the work of the University Ishi again becomes the text, and is objectified by the very agents who profess for him admiration and friendship (Rockafellar, n.d.).

The student of the canon, Kroeber, becomes the producer of the canon, and the canon becomes an instrument of repression. For instance, romanticized memories and the mythologizing of Alfred Kroeber and Ishi by Theodora Kroeber (Starn, 2001) have served to obscure and delay the development of facts regarding both Yahi society and Kroeber's professional deportment. Because of her romanticized portrayals of husband Alfred's work in the book, *Ishi In Two Worlds*, generations of readers have wrongly assumed that the Yahi and their relations are extinct, that Ishi was full blood Yahi (Kell, 1996), and that Kroeber's motives vis a vis Ishi were pure and noble. Extinction is convenient if you want to romanticize memory of the dead, but it is bad science and cultural imperialism if the dead still live. Truthful meaning for this reader only began to be produced after time and multiple readings of the text could be tempered by information from other sources.

In *Misreading Science in the Twentieth Century*, John M. Budd (2001) offers a more scholarly insight into the difference between assumptions made when reading science vs. reading literature, and what

happens when there is a problem with the canon. Budd suggests that even if a scientific work is met with some skepticism it is construed to be offered in earnest good faith and quotes Iser's description of the translation process as being informed by an assumption of purpose. This loading works against insurance that misleading or deceitful works are not disseminated or perpetuated (Budd, 2001, p.302).

Scientific texts are intended to have one specific meaning, while literary texts are intended to be irreducible to a single meaning. Moreover, the result of scientific research tend to be far reaching, spilling out into the realms of politics, business, and education (Budd, 2001, p.300-301).

Budd's sums up his essay by stating that, "Scientists are using the realist foundations of science and the persuasive force of rhetoric to induce the acceptance of ideas and interpretations... the rhetorical dimension of the texts is the territory in which potential misreading is centered...Even in light of realism, understanding of scientific communication depends on reading and reception, which is not an absolutely objective process" (Budd, 2001, p. 314).

The not entirely objective process described within the boundaries of reception theory assumes that a work is not finished, that the receiver's translation can change. This changing reception is modulated by contextual information and is thus described as contextual theory (Tota, 1998). It is the process of contextualization that allowed this reader to begin to extract meaning from Theodora Kroeber's romanticized text.

The canonization of knowledge, the anointing of the text, must be viewed with skepticism, as it is the result of the political process inherent in the development of academic institutions. This political load insures that knowledge is not always free of the temporal baggage of its handlers. This is not to say that the author is doomed to retrospective failure, but that the institutional and temporal wrapper is key to the apprehension and delineation of meaning vectors by the reader (Tota, 1998, p. 48).

This active readership is necessary to decode the acculturated history with which we matriculate through our educational cycle. If we grow up believing that our Western history is the story of pioneers overcoming adversity, performing manifest destiny, and taming the frontier when it is actually a story of conquest and occupation (Limerick. 2000) it is no wonder that we are blind to our own foreign policy's fault in supporting conquest and occupation.

Reception history is a potential avenue for decoding cultural artifacts and reconstructing understanding of extinct culture (Holtorf, n.d.). But more interesting is the historical looping that exists when, for example, an indigenous group closes archaeological research to claim ancient human remains as ancestors thereby forcing researchers to form a new reading of both their object of research and the living culture that repudiates their research premise (Riffe, 1992).

Science, in seeking to allow a Cartesian model of accepting only that which cannot be doubted (Holub, 1989, p. 37) is best reduced from rhetorical hegemony by Iser's paraphrase of Descartes, "I interpret, therefore I am" (Iser, 2000, p. 1). It is the performative nature of interpretation, the hermeneutic charting of the territories approaching the unknowable, that power our drive toward worldmaking (Iser, 2000, p. 156).

What does any of this have to do with art practice? It is the affirmative act of the cultural producer that reflects on and influences the tone of social discourse. Active engagement in cultural dialogue requires more than making paintings about painting. Such leveraged and privileged activity even if ultimately constructive still limits the potential for social health and a universal transmotion. Furthermore, the bandwidth for dialogue offered by the traditional dynamics of gallery: audience : patron : critic : institution is narrow to nonexistent.

Why bother explicating faults in our understanding of the past, why try to understand the subject cultures of failed ethnologies? Because our past is our present, and it is essential that we understand the un-

derlying structures in place. Just as I insist on looking beyond the “subject” of art and art history for content and gesture I also look beyond my own acculturated dystopia, performing an end run to gain understanding of such things as the power and beauty of oral tradition.

Observing the reason for this prospectus, a proposal encompassing both written and media components, it is time to describe the media vessel and content. Video installation has been the focus of most of my studio effort. While overt interactive media are a potentiality, it is immediately problematic both aesthetically and practically due to the teams of talent and considerable time and expense typically implicit in such projects. This “Hollywood” model of spectacle production creates a layer of mediation that risks reducing the responsibility of the author. Besides, visual art is inherently interactive, even if covertly so.

The language and vocabulary of what we call new media is now being developed, just as it was in film’s nascent stage. Coding development, whether it be C++, Java, or Lingo offers great control and ultimate autonomy especially if pursued beyond the confines of shrink-wrapped software product. Programming languages are being considered in fulfillment of certain language requirements in PhD programs. What is of greatest interest, however, is development of intuitive approaches facilitating individual authorship offering maximum flexibility and improvisation while supporting the fundamental imperative: Raise the level of discourse, dialogue, and true interaction.

Pursuit of funding for complex overtly interactive projects can influence the type of work ultimately produced. Project and team management can tend to limit or distract from the development of focused content. For the moment I prefer to create spectacle using methods that accommodate and facilitate improvisation in process and individual authorship while still considering hybrid solutions.

Work completed and in progress comprises images created during extensive fieldwork in the Yahi landscape in the Lassen Foothills of northeastern California. Some of this work has already been exhibited and additional fieldwork is underway. In addition to the video images are time lapse images, digital camera captures, sound recordings, documentation of my movement through the Yahi landscape recorded with GPS receiver and digital topographic map, and print objects.

Other tangents of the research include an informal journal of my movement through the actual and virtual Yahi landscape. Archival photographs and other materials gathered at the Hearst Museum and Bancroft Library at Berkeley are being developed as writing and exhibit components. Written vignettes of my memory of experiences in the field have been performed as spoken word in conjunction with the visual elements in conference settings. Time based material employed in video installations is being re-composed as streaming video in a web site being initiated in Winter 2003. One museum installation is confirmed for Winter 2004 with more being planned.

Scholarly writing, documentary film, and tangential materials dealing with areas of Ishi myth become grounds for new work. Into this effort is folded a critique of new media discourse with an attempt to anticipate areas requiring future critical attention.

*Looking for Ishi* is an inquiry into the landscape and our intervention in it. It is both new media research and cultural critique. Multiple tangents of history, anthropology, contemporary culture, the geography of power, environmental chronicity, media technology, and myth and the canonization of knowledge are intertwined as mediations and parameters for the creation of content and form.

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## Biography

**Christopher August** (1953-2003) earned his MFA in studio art at the University of California, Santa Barbara and a BA in photography from California Institute of the Arts in Valencia. An artist, musician, naturalist, environmentalist and a passionate advocate of Native American rights, Chris had been developing his multi-media "Looking for Ishi" project over the past three years until his untimely death in March. A leading practitioner of both digital and traditional printmaking, Chris was the founder of August Editions in San Luis Obispo, California. Cuesta College will present a retrospective exhibition of his print work in August 2003.



