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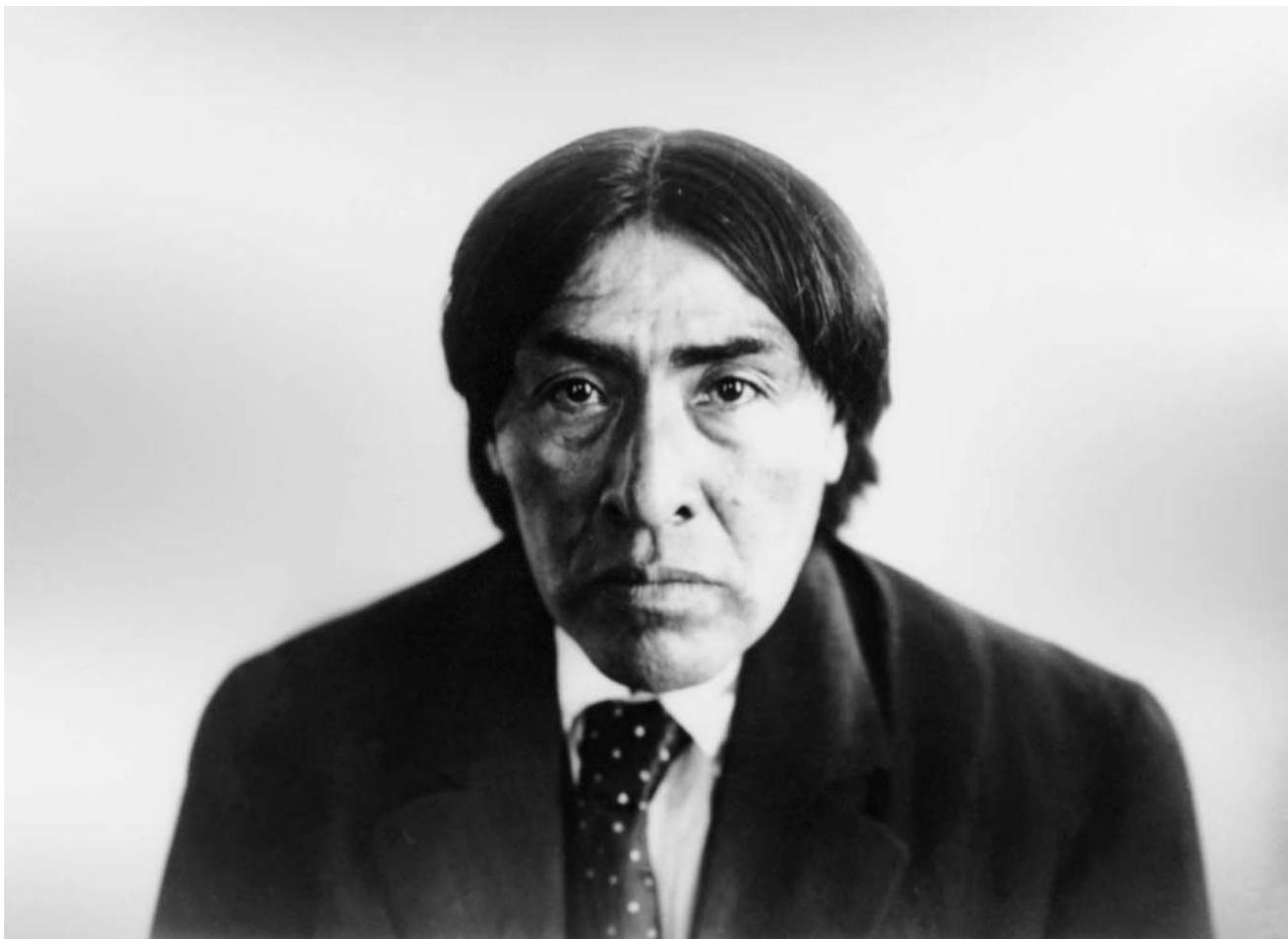
Stop Hunting Ishi

Ishi must be tired. For 160 years, people have hunted him and other California Indians. In the mid-nineteenth century, settlers, miners, and ranchers tracked Ishi and his family in revenge for the killing of livestock. In the early twentieth century, anthropologists trailed after Ishi, searching for North America's "last wild Indian." In 2000, Maidu and Pit River tribal members tracked down his brain, which Dr. Saxton Pope had removed at Ishi's autopsy and Professor Alfred Kroeber had sent to the Smithsonian. In 2012, photographers Byron Wolfe and Troy Jollimore continued the quest to capture Ishi, visiting Deer Creek in search of his wilderness. Settlers, anthropologists, and indigenous people have hounded Ishi for different purposes. Understanding why people hunt Ishi tells us much about how Californians envision Indians and their past, present, and future.

The hunting of Ishi dates to the mid-nineteenth century. After the California Gold Rush, miners, ranchers, and farmers invaded California and occupied or expelled Indians from seemingly unused areas. Domesticated livestock trampled the food sources that indigenous people harvested and chased away deer. In response, California Indians killed livestock, both as a source of food and as a symbolic attack on the animals that troubled their economic systems. In April 1871, four cowboys hunted a small band of Yahis, which included Ishi. While working in the Sacramento Valley, the four men came across a trail of blood, presumably from one of the cows the men herded. Following the track, the cowboys flushed some Yahis cutting chunks of flesh from a dead steer. The Yahis fled the scene. Rather than pursue them, the cowboys returned to their camp, found a hunting dog, and stalked the Indians to a cave. The hunters opened fire, killing about thirty Yahis in what one historian has called "the last known large massacre of California Indians."¹ Ishi was one of the few survivors of this band.

The so-called Kingsley Cave Massacre culminated more than one hundred years of hunting California Indians. In the eighteenth century, Spanish Franciscan priests and soldiers tracked down native people who fled the missions. After independence,

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Portrait of Ishi by E.H. Kemp, July 1912. COURTESY OF THE PHOEBE A. HEARST MUSEUM OF ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE REGENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA.

Mexican officials trailed California Indians who stole horses from ranchos and sold them to fur traders. Beginning in the 1850s, miners and ranchers hunted California Indians accused of killing livestock or ambushing settlers.

What prompted Euro-Americans and Americans to hunt California Indians? In part, they considered Indians socially and biologically inferior. Franciscans believed California Indians were children who, without the Franciscans, would quickly satiate their “brutal appetites.” Franciscans pursued California Indians, especially those who ran away from the missions, to protect them from themselves. Americans, on the other hand, argued California Indians were a racially degraded people. Americans called California Indians “diggers,” a word that rhymes with the racial epithet attached to African Americans. The racial pseudoscience favored by many white Americans at the time argued that California Indians had dark skins and were, therefore, closer to animals

than white men—and so, Americans hunted California Indians because they considered them little better than wild animals.²

Racial ideology only partially justified the hunting of California Indians. Spanish, Mexicans, and Americans also pursued California Indians they considered criminals. Franciscans believed California Indians owed a spiritual debt to the priests once they entered the missions and accepted baptism. Leaving the mission was tantamount to breaking an indentured servant contract, and Indians needed to return to the mission.³ Both Mexicans and Americans tracked down Indians for the theft of property, such as horses and cattle. In nineteenth-century California, men like those depicted “protecting the settlers” in J. Ross Browne’s *The Coast Rangers* hunted Indians to protect American lives and property from Indians. Americans, like the four cowboys, linked the acquisition of property to their



Ishi's death mask, 1920.

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social identities. An attack on one was an attack on all and deserved retribution.⁴

Hunting Indians had disastrous consequences for California's indigenous people. In the late eighteenth century, more than 300,000 Indians lived in California. By the time of the Gold Rush, 150,000 Indians lived within the state's boundaries. The worst, of course, was yet to come. By 1900, the hunting of California Indians, in conjunction with disease and starvation, reduced the population to little more than 25,000. The near eradication of California Indians was the ultimate desire of a settler society that needed indigenous people to disappear, so that their land in particular, and California as a state, could be a country for white men and white families. Ishi's story is the most famous of these narratives of hunting California Indians and the dramatic population decline among Native Californians. By 1911, the hunting of Yahi had apparently reduced their population to this one man.

The hunting of Ishi was not always physically violent. Beginning in 1909, anthropologists from the University of California tracked Ishi. Two years earlier, surveyors had been looking for a suitable site for a dam on Mill Creek in rural northeastern California when they came upon Ishi's

camp. A concealed Ishi welcomed the surveyors into camp with two warning arrows shot from a bow. After disturbing an elderly woman, likely Ishi's mother, and ransacking the camp, the men informed Chico and Oroville newspapers of the "wild Indians" in the mountains. Although there were some skeptics, many believed the story. Ishi and other Yahis had spent the years between the Kingsley Creek massacre and the invasion of their camp pilfering food, glass, and metal from cabins. Word of the discovery of Ishi's camp reached anthropologist Alfred Kroeber, who dispatched one of his protégés, T.T. Waterman, to hunt for these elusive Indians. Unlike the cowboys who perpetrated the Kingsley Cave Massacre, Kroeber and Waterman did not want to kill Indians. They wanted to study them before they disappeared.

Kroeber pursued "wild Indians" because he believed California Indian cultures were vanishing. In 1900, Kroeber arrived in California and soon assumed the reins of the Hearst Museum and the University of California's anthropology department. Kroeber embarked on a long career studying California Indian languages and cultures. Following the guidance of his mentor and academic adviser Franz Boas, Kroeber endeavored to salvage what was remaining of California Indian cultures and languages before they disappeared in the face of modernity. Kroeber tracked reliable informants among the Mojaves, Yuroks, and Yukis. The possibility of finding "wild Indians," supposedly uncontaminated by modernity, was too much for Kroeber to pass up, so he dispatched Waterman to the rugged northeastern mountains of California to track down Ishi and bring him in.

Waterman's two trips to Deer Creek were fruitless, but Kroeber's pursuit would not be in vain. In 1911, Ishi turned up at a slaughterhouse in Oroville and was subsequently captured by workers, who turned him over to the local sheriff. Word of the captured "wild man" again reached Kroeber, who obtained permission from the Office of Indian Affairs to bring Ishi from Oroville, where he stayed in the town jail, to San Francisco. For the next five years, until his death, Ishi lived in San Francisco, working as a janitor at Kroeber's museum, sharing the Yahi language with anthropologists and demonstrating Yahi craft making (especially arrowhead making) for museum patrons. In 1914, Kroeber insisted that Ishi return to Deer Creek, where he hoped that Ishi would show him what life was like in the

wild. For Kroeber, the wilderness was a haven from modernity and urbanization. Kroeber took pictures of Ishi hunting, calling rabbits, and butchering a deer. He and Ishi also mapped the Yahi homeland. For Ishi, though, Deer Creek was not some pristine, premodern landscape. Instead, it was a landscape haunted by those killed by modern Indian hunters, such as the four cowboys at Kingsley Cave. Ishi wept when he came upon the location of his mother's burial. Another day, Ishi came to camp and told the others that he thought he had heard his deceased mother and sister's voices on one of the trails.⁵

That Kroeber's hunting of Ishi was not physically violent does not mean it was benign. Kroeber's anthropology depicted California Indians as primitive, echoing the racialist ideas of the nineteenth century. California Indians lived in "tribelets" not "tribes." They did not practice warfare, but participated in small-scale battles where no one was really hurt. Kroeber created essentialist categories about California Indian identity that denied Ishi and other native people's modernity.

In 1914, when Ishi returned to Oroville on the way to Deer Creek, town residents did not believe it was the same man who had been captured near the slaughterhouse. Homer Speegle, who saw Ishi in the Oroville jail in 1911, noted that Ishi was considerably heavier than before and wore American-style clothing, hardly the trappings of an Indian, let alone the last wild Yahi. Because American Indians could never be modern, according to Kroeber's standard, they had to be vanishing. Kroeber's version of Ishi has since stood for the fate of all California Indians, who ostensibly disappeared in the early twentieth century only to be, in some people's view, shockingly resurrected in the late twentieth century with the advent of Indian gaming.

In the mid-1990s, another group took up the pursuit of Ishi: California Indians themselves. Art Angle, a Maidu from Oroville, founded the Butte County Native American Cultural Committee, with the goal of repatriating Maidu remains from museums. Angle knew Ishi's story and wanted to return his ashes to the Oroville area. He had also heard rumors of Ishi's autopsy and the removal of his brain, and he did not want to bring Ishi's remains home incomplete. Anthropologist Orin Starn met with Angle and tracked Ishi's brain to a vat in a Smithsonian storage facility in College Park, Maryland. The Butte County committee and Starn met with Smithsonian officials and initiated the

process of repatriating Ishi's brain to California. The Smithsonian, however, returned Ishi's brain to the Redding Rancheria, home of the Yahi's linguistic relatives, the Pit River people, rather than to Angle's Butte County committee. In 2000, Mickey Gimmell and other Pit River people buried Ishi's brain and ashes at an undisclosed location along Deer Creek.⁶

Angle, Starn, and, eventually, Gimmell's pursuit of Ishi were part of a cultural and political renewal among twentieth-century California Indians. The origins of this revival are rooted in post-World War II California. Marie Potts, a Maidu activist, worked with other California Indians to agitate for land claims in the 1940s and 1950s and was a member of the National Congress on American Indians. In 1969, American Indians in San Francisco occupied Alcatraz Island. Two years later, Mickey Gimmell, members of the American Indian Movement, and other Pit River people took over Pit River land that was owned by Pacific Gas and Electric. In 1979, Tillie Hardwick, a Pomo woman, led a Supreme Court case that eventually overturned the dreadful termination of California Indian tribes earlier in the twentieth century. In 1988, the Cabazon Band of Mission Indians won a court case that paved the way for the expansion of Indian gaming in California and the rest of the United States.

Early on, Ishi was not a symbol for this tribal sovereignty movement. He lacked the charisma of leaders such as Geronimo, Sitting Bull, or Crazy Horse, none of whom were Californians. But the efforts of the Butte County committee and Redding Rancheria to track down Ishi's remains and properly bury them in northern California were assertions of sovereignty, and so Ishi became a symbol of reclaiming what has been lost to the ravages of California colonialism.

Since the 1760s, in one way or another, Ishi has been vital to stories Californians tell about themselves and their state. At first, Ishi and his kin represented the savage Indian on the frontier, indiscriminately killing livestock as well as white men, women, and children, and deserving a violent end himself. Ishi has symbolized the anthropological Indian, practicing precontact ways supposedly uncontaminated by modernity. Ishi has signified tribal sovereignty and self-determination, the renaissance of indigenous politics and culture made possible by the survival of indigenous people and nations, and the economic opportunities of Indian gaming.

Yet, Ishi has also been elusive. He survived genocide. Ishi was never the “wild man” or “stone age man” that Kroeber and others depicted. The tussle between the Butte County Native American Cultural Committee and the Redding Rancheria over the return of his brain and ashes to Deer Creek revealed unresolved interethnic divisions among northern California’s Indian nations.

Although writer Troy Jollimore and photographer Byron Wolfe pursued Ishi’s landscape, history, and memory, and not Ishi himself, Jollimore noted that he wanted to experience something associated with Ishi, something “mystical or numinous.” Instead the experience was “ordinary and matter of fact.”⁷

As with many aspects of American Indian history, people often look for those things that tell them something about themselves, not about indigenous people. People have searched for Ishi not necessarily to learn more about Ishi, but to inform their own understandings of the world. This may be one reason that Ishi has avoided capture. Perhaps it is a good time to stop hunting Ishi and let him rest. **B**

Notes

- ¹ Benjamin Madley, “American Genocide: The California Indian Catastrophe, 1846–1873” (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 2009), 490–91.
- ² On the racial ideas applied to California Indians, see James Rawls, *Indians of California: The Changing Image* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1984) and Tomás Almaguer, *Racial*

Fault Lines: The Historical Origins of White Supremacy in California (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

- ³ On California Indians and the Spanish mission system, see the exceptional work of Steven Hackel, *Children of Coyote, Missionaries of Saint Francis: Indian-Spanish Relations in Colonial California, 1769–1850* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005) and James Sandos, *Converting California: Indians and Franciscans in the Missions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).
- ⁴ On the Mexican and American periods, see Albert Hurtado, *Indian Survival on the California Frontier* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), Brendan C. Lindsay, *Murder State: California’s Native American Genocide, 1846–1873* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), and Madley, “American Genocide.”
- ⁵ One of the most famous books to consider Ishi’s life is Theodora Kroeber, *Ishi in Two Worlds: A Biography of the Last Wild Indian in North America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002, 1961). A revision, that places Ishi’s life in the context of modernization and ideas of wilderness, is Douglas Sackman, *Wild Men: Ishi and Kroeber in the Wilderness of Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). Ishi scholars should also consult Richard Burrill’s encyclopedic work *Ishi’s Untold Story in His First World: A Biography of the Last of His Band of Yahi Indians in North America*, Parts I–IV, (Red Bluff: The Anthro Company, 2011–2012).
- ⁶ Orin Starn covers the repatriation of Ishi’s remains in *Ishi’s Brain: In Search of America’s Last “Wild” Indian* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004). The issue of repatriation also produced a retrospective on anthropology, Ishi and his place in California history. See Karl Kroeber and Clifton Kroeber, eds., *Ishi in Three Centuries* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003).
- ⁷ Troy Jollimore, “Some Version of the Same River: Rephotographing Ishi,” this volume.