



# Anthropology Book Forum

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**Garrett, Andrew. 2023. *The Unnaming of Kroeber Hall – Language, Memory, and Indigenous California*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, The MIT Press. 472 pp. ISBN: 9780262547093**

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Andrew Garrett, professor in the department of linguistics at the University of California Berkeley (UC Berkeley), sets out in this book to investigate historical accounts and recent controversies about the legacy of anthropologist Alfred Kroeber. Garrett offers a nuanced, well-researched and detailed account of early-twentieth-century anthropology and linguistics, mainly by focusing on the work and life of Kroeber – who arrived at the UC Berkeley anthropology department in 1901.

The institution of UC Berkeley has, along with many other university campuses across the US, recently undergone scrutiny (internally and externally) for their role in upholding or benefitting from slavery, settler colonialism, and white supremacy not least after the renewed Black Lives Matter Protests that surfaced in 2020 (Anbert 2024; Fanshel 2021). As a reaction to mounting critique from students, staff, and faculty, UC Berkeley has chosen to dename (what Garrett refers to as unname) five buildings on campus, with potentially more to follow. One of the buildings to have undergone such a denaming, is the Anthropology and Arts Practice Building – previously known as Kroeber Hall. A decision that prompted Garrett to dive into the legacy of Kroeber.

Alfred Kroeber and his work have been the subject of several biographies, articles, and debates in which he is portrayed very differently: as a skillful ethnographer, as a supporter of Indigenous rights, as a salvage anthropologist who portrayed Indigenous ways of living as frozen in time, as a scrupulous academic who extracted Indigenous knowledge for his own gain, and as an anthropologist who harmfully impacted federal government decisions in determining recognized tribal statuses (cf. Barron 2020; Deloria 1997; Field 2005; Foster 2003; T. Kroeber 2004; K. Kroeber and Kroeber 2003; Le Guin 2004; Scheper-Hughes 2001; Kenny, Killion, and Scheper-Hughes 2002; Starn 2004). More recently, other authors have

discussed Kroeber's contribution to anthropology in new ways, and offered perspectives on how we can understand former ethnographic standards in the light of our own times and moralities (see for example King 2020), and criminologist Tony Platt has written two books to "uncover" different scandals at UC Berkeley, not least the scandal of housing and hoarding Indigenous human remains at UC Berkeley, with the aid of Alfred Kroeber and the anthropology department (Platt 2023; 2021).

Garret's book is therefore situated within a long and ongoing debate about the history of anthropology, early anthropology's contribution to colonial practices and its entanglements with settler colonial projects. Garret insists on retaining contrasts and contradictions in dissecting Kroeber's work and contributions, and thereby creates a carefully researched and nuanced narrative.

Kroeber argued forcefully against eugenics, uplifted Indigenous scholars by referencing them as authors of work they contributed to (unlike many others, then, and today) (Garret 2023, 146), but he also subscribed to the "vanishment idea," that is, the assumption that Indigenous languages and cultures in North America were destined to disappear (ibid.,41). Kroeber engaged in language documentation and cultivated lasting and meaningful relationships with Indigenous interlocutors, but hesitated to speak directly of the genocide of Indigenous peoples that took place in California in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (ibid., 171). Garret himself describes this as two competing narratives, one narrative in which anthropologists and linguists have been part of structural and state-sponsored genocide and dispossession of land, where Kroeber's salvage anthropological thinking (the idea that Indigenous people would eventually become extinct) gave legitimacy to state violence. In the other narrative, Kroeber showed humanity to all people and proved the existence of Indigenous civilizations, in a time where this was otherwise inconceivable (ibid.,18).

Garret succinctly outlines these contradictions to make readers understand and appreciate the complexities of Kroeber's legacy in four parts. In the first part of the book Garret contextualizes Kroeber's work by drawing a picture of colonial California, describing the invention of museums and universities and the displacement and genocide of Indigenous populations. In the second part Garret focuses on Kroeber's contributions to the field of linguistics, his language documentation and not least his collaboration with Indigenous scholars. Thirdly, Garret discusses the collection of ancestral remains currently kept at UC Berkeley, and the ethical implications of archeological and anthropological practices a

century ago. He also reopens the debate about the Yahi man, known as Ishi, who resided at the Anthropological Museum of UC Berkeley from 1911-1916. Ishi's story has, like Kroeber's, been told and retold many times. In some narratives, Ishi worked as a janitor in the museum, in others, he was kept as a human exhibition, or as an informant readily at hand for the anthropological faculty, and in yet others, he is described as a close friend of Kroeber's and his colleagues (cf. Field 2005; T. Kroeber 2004; Scheper-Hughes 2001; Vizenor 2001). Yet, Garret manages to give more complexity to the narrative than what I have encountered before, he allows contradictions to coexist, and highlights Ishi's agency, while also emphasizing Kroeber's responsibility, empathy and paternalistic behavior. Finally, in the fourth part, Garret describes Kroeber's advocacy for Indigenous land rights, and maybe most importantly, he argues that Kroeber *did not* impact federal decisions on recognizing tribal status (Garret 2023, 260-267). According to Garret this common misunderstanding has been circulating for years among scholars and in the public sphere in general (including in my own work) (cf. Anbert 2024; Field 2003; Orona and Esquivido 2020). However, according to Garret, this misunderstanding does not change his conviction that denaming Kroeber Hall at UC Berkeley was the right decision, albeit not for the reason others have cited.

Garret argues that the discussion about denaming (or unnamings) Kroeber Hall was never really about Kroeber, but about UC Berkeley's unacknowledged settler colonial legacy. Rather, simply changing a name at "an institution that still celebrates its colonial projects and honors those responsible for colonial depredations was... a way to deflect attention from self-examination" (Garret 2023, 21). By this, Garret refers to the unexamined early history of UC Berkeley's hires of white supremacists, dealings with donors that made their wealth through exploitation of the Indigenous populations in the US and abroad, as well as the general colonial beginnings as a land grant university that inevitably displaced Indigenous people. For example, three buildings on campus are named after the donors Phoebe and George Hearst, including the Phoebe A. Hearst Anthropological Museum, that has been at the center of debates about the lack of repatriation of ancestral remains. According to Garret, there are no hints on campus that the Hearst fortune was accumulated from Indigenous dispossession, and that Phoebe A. Hearst herself participated in digging up ancestral remains and accumulating Indigenous cultural heritage to be displayed or archived in the museum (*ibid.*, 292). The denaming must then be understood as part of a larger justified anger directed at the institution of UC Berkeley. Institutional resistance to repatriation efforts have also played a major role in the denaming of Kroeber Hall. Although, according to Garret, Kroeber played a

minor role in the actual collection and digging of remains, the anthropology department and the institution of UC Berkeley have been reluctant to address repatriation requests or have actively fought against it. Demands to rename Kroeber Hall therefore, was about much more than just Alfred Kroeber, but about institutional ignorance and misconduct. For Garret then, working to right some of the historical wrongs have only just begun.

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