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### Ishi, Briet's Antelope, and the Documentality of Human Documents

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## INTRODUCTION

The Yahi man known as Ishi is a fascinating character: one who has been the subject of much debate in the field of anthropology. He may, at first glance, be an odd choice for a discussion about documents. Ishi, however, arguably became a document—a “human document”—in the last years of his life. His experience, and others’ experience of him, during this time reveals a great deal about our lives in what Michael Buckland (2015) has called the “document society” (p. 1). This paper is my first step in thinking about the complexities of human documents, with Ishi as a revealing example. Following an exploration of what it means to call Ishi a document, especially as seen through the lens of documentality, I offer some initial thoughts on what this means for us today, far removed from Ishi’s museum home in San Francisco in the 1910s.

On August 29, 1911, the *San Francisco Call* published what would be the first of many photographs of a man whose name we do not know. The accompanying news story described the events of the evening before when butchers in Oroville, a small town in northern California, found an emaciated man whose hair was burned close to his head crouching in the corral of their slaughterhouse as their dogs barked at him. They called the sheriff who recognized the man as an “Indian” but could not learn anything else because the man did not speak English. What followed next set the tone for an unusual relationship—one defined by documentality—between the man we now call Ishi and settler society.

In these first moments, Ishi became “weighted down under a ‘vestment of documents’” (Briet, 2006, p. 10). This is how Suzanne Briet, expanding on Raymond Bayer’s thoughts, describes the phenomenon of being “brought into public knowledge.” The local crowd that gathered to see Ishi even before the sheriff got him to the jail for safekeeping was only the first of many. The local papers that told the story about the “last wild Indian of North America” were, likewise, only the first in a long line of further study, interpretation, and writing on Ishi. The San Francisco papers quickly picked up the story. It was in this manner that Alfred Kroeber, an anthropologist at the University of California, and his colleague T. T. Waterman came to learn about Ishi. Within two days of Ishi’s “discovery,” Kroeber sent a telegram to the sheriff, writing, “Newspapers report capture wild Indian speaking language other tribes totally unable to understand ... if story correct hold Indian till arrival Professor State University who will take charge and be responsible for him. Matter important account aboriginal history” (as cited in Kroeber, 1976, p. 6). This brief telegram message set the tone for the rest of Ishi’s life.

### COMPARING ISHI TO BRIET'S ANTELOPE

The “weighting down” that Briet describes as a condition of being vested as a document occurs “immediately” when “the least event” is turned into public knowledge (2006, p. 10). In a small town like Oroville, Ishi’s appearance, starving, looking for food, and making his way to a butcher where some dogs bark at him, naturally attracted some attention. Yet, to the casual observer, this event may not have looked all that different from the small excitement of a newly conspicuous individual experiencing homelessness. Immediately, however, Ishi’s daily, rather mundane, efforts to survive assumed a kind of public importance as word spread. He was transformed from simply a man or “one of the people”—which is what “Ishi” means in Yana, his Yahi language—to his “iconic status as a ‘wild,’ ‘generic,’ and ‘authentic’ Indian” (Castaneda, 2009, p. 149). Briet famously chose an antelope, newly discovered and placed in a zoo, to explore the idea of a document. The similarities between this hypothetical antelope and Ishi are eerie.

In Briet’s description, the antelope—as the initial document—is first encountered as a representative of a kind—and then captured and brought to a zoo in Europe. Under the guidance of Boasian “salvage” anthropology—which saw each Indigenous culture as unique, and therefore precious and worthy of being “saved”—Kroeber, a student of Franz Boas, first encountered Ishi as a representative of a kind. Then Ishi was brought from the area around his home to San Francisco, about 150 miles away, where he came to live in the Anthropological Museum of the University of California and made many public appearances. Both the general public and anthropologists watched him fashion bows, arrow shafts, arrowheads, other tools—and if the weather was nice, houses made of branches and bark—sing songs, and tell stories.

Briet’s antelope leads to a wide variety of what she calls secondary or derived documents, including an initial press release that leads to the antelope becoming a topic of discussion at the Academy of Sciences, which in turn leads to the antelope’s inclusion in university courses, display as a preserved antelope in a museum, recordings on disk and in cinema, monographs and encyclopedia entries that are catalogued in libraries, artistic interpretations, and further analyzation, conservation, and techniques. Each and every one of these forms of documentation happens to Ishi. The key difference is that the theoretical antelope’s documentation happens among biologists, whereas Ishi’s documentation happened among anthropologists.

The secondary documents derived from Ishi are too numerous to describe in detail here. They consist of his regular inclusion as a subject in the field of anthropology, newspaper stories, academic monographs, essays, his death mask, and a variety of films, documentaries, novels, stage productions, music, and even a comic book. Most of these documents are catalogued. Each of them—with the exception of the death mask, which is uniquely human—has a corollary in Briet’s

description of secondary documents related to the antelope. Some specific examples indicate the unique reach, form, or influence of some of the secondary documents about Ishi. Theodora Kroeber's *Ishi in Two Worlds: A Biography of the Last Wild Indian in North America* is part of California's high school curriculum. Composer Malcolm Goldstein uses Ishi's myths, stories, and songs—recorded on 148 Edison cylinders—as “found sounds” in his compositions *Ishi/timechangingspaces* and *Ishi/man waxati Soundings*. Of particular importance in the Ishi story is his brain, which was removed, preserved, and sent to the Smithsonian Institute when he died. This happened against the wishes of Ishi and, initially, Kroeber. The effort to locate and repatriate Ishi's brain brought renewed attention to Ishi in 1999 along with an apology from the anthropology department at Berkeley and “profound and transformative effects” on the Indigenous peoples of northern California who came together “to pray and to prepare themselves and the land for the return of Ishi.” (Scheper-Hughes, 2003, p. 121).

I describe the similarities between Briet's hypothetical antelope and Ishi as eerie. Yet, this comparison is not surprising. In fact, it is obvious enough that a reporter commenting on Ishi just a few days after he arrived in San Francisco described him as “a human document, with the key to most of the hieroglyphics lost” (Ashe Miller, 1979, p. 97). She did not need Briet to identify Ishi as a human document. Rather, the eeriness stems from the fact that, in spite of all the similarities, he is *not* a document, even as he is. Surely, it should not be this easy to call a human a document. This kind of reduction of self to an object or representation betrays a moral sense of personhood. Fully exploring the ethical problems in this phenomenon, however, must await further study.

#### COMPLICATIONS IN THE COMPARISON

For now, the sense of eeriness prompts us to refocus on Ishi the person and the factors that complicate his story and differentiate him from the antelope. Three particular complications are apparent. First, the Yahi “were by no means a legendary lost tribe existing in a state of nature” (Starn, 2004, p. 77). Second, Ishi's agency intrudes on his use as evidence. Finally, Ishi had complex relationships with other people, some of whom were friends. Though Briet's antelope might have relationships with humans, these relationships would have a different quality. I will explore each of these complications in turn.

Let's accept, for the moment, Briet's argument that documents can be equated with evidence. In the example of the antelope, this makes sense. It likely does not strike us as odd that one antelope can be a sample of a category of antelopes. In the example of Ishi, however, we quickly run into difficulties. Kroeber, following his Boasian training, depicted Ishi as the “uncontaminated” evidence of the Yahi people. Yet, Ishi's language included several Spanish words. Researchers in the 1990s discovered several metal cans and glass bottles with patent

marks dating from the 1880s to 1911, but only one stone mortar, at Ishi's last known hiding place. Ishi's techniques for making cultural artifacts indicated outside influences. Each of these factors points to a figure who was very much influenced by his time and place among other Indigenous peoples and settlers in northern California at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, based on his analysis of the lithic techniques and patterns in Ishi's stone technology, Steven Shackley believes that Ishi may not have been Yahai, but instead a "Wintu/Nomlaki" who "lived the life of a Yahai" (2003, p. 193). In other words, according to Shackley, if Ishi is evidence of something, he is "a reflection of the adaptability of humans, and particularly the Yahai, to tremendous long-term cultural stress" (2003, p. 193). One way to frame this complication is that Ishi, the initial document, was only the illusion of evidence or, perhaps more accurately, evidence of something besides what the anthropologists wanted to find but still inscribed into Ishi as a document. The secondary documents derived from Ishi may support this conclusion.

These secondary documents are, to some extent, efforts to make sense of Ishi. However, they are also used to "serve various political, media, sentimental, and institutional ends" (Biestman, 2003, p. 146). In other words, Ishi the person gets hidden behind Ishi the representation, used not just to explain or inform any variety of phenomena, but to do so for a multiplicity of reasons. Here, Ishi's "legacy" points us to something about documents that goes beyond Briet's definition. For Briet, the technique of documentation is "sumptuously dressed according to the wishes of its masters, the scholars" (2006, p. 13). Scholars certainly have played their part in creating secondary documents derived from Ishi, but so have politicians, artists, musicians, and authors of fiction and theatre. Ishi's story makes it clear that scholars do not hold a monopoly on the creation of documents.

Ishi's agency also complicates the comparison to Briet's antelope. For the four years and seven months following his appearance in Oroville, Ishi made decisions about his vestment of documents and the extent to which he would bear its weight. Questions about Ishi's agency start with his appearance in Oroville: What drove him there and did he intend to be discovered? Though we do not have answers to these questions, they matter to the prominent narrative set up throughout the secondary documents, in which Ishi is "captured." His hair was clipped or singed close to his head in a traditional sign of Yahai mourning. Weaver believes this may indicate that his last remaining family, his mother, had recently died. He therefore "was reportedly indifferent to whether he lived or died" (2003, p. 37). Indigenous individuals tend to believe it was a mistake; that Ishi was "in search of refuge at the nearby Feather River (Maidu Indian) rancharia," that he was betrayed by the dogs, a "loner," disoriented, or distrustful of all other humans (Scheper-Hughes, 2003, p. 111). Whether or not it was intentional, it is clear that Ishi was starving and needed food. He also willingly went with the sheriff and interacted with the crowd that came to see him.

Ishi most obviously asserted his agency in what he told, or refused to tell, the anthropologists. Justice Gary Strankman sees in Ishi's refusal to give his name an act of power and dignity:

He had a name, his name, but they could not know it. And with unintended irony, they named him 'Ishi.' That is in *Yahi: Man*, 'one of the people,' Adam, Everyman, No Man. To call that name is to call for Godot. Godot, Ishi: no one comes, everyone comes. The tribal man, holding the power of his name to himself, becomes Ishi – one of the people, a people of one, a tribe of one, all others having been destroyed by the namers (2003, p. 361).

Along with this name, he kept his personal history to himself, primarily sharing his language, some cultural methods, and *Yahi* stories and songs. The history he decided to narrate for the anthropologists was one that "elided the traumas of his own experience in favor of a perhaps more nostalgic and memorializing life story of the collective *Yahi* self" (Castaneda, 2009, p. 150).

Further evidence of his agency is displayed in the freedom with which he moved around San Francisco. He shopped on Seventh Avenue between Golden Gate Park and Judah Street and eventually the grocer, baker, tobacconist, and cobbler there all greeted him "by name." He enjoyed streetcars and ferries, often using both means to go on the hour and a half trip to the university in Berkeley. He and Pope practiced their archery in Golden Gate Park. Loud, a staff member at the museum, initially accompanied Ishi on these trips. Quickly, however, Ishi ventured forth alone.

This aspect of Ishi's agency leads directly to the third complicating factor: his friendships. The "inner circle," so to speak, consisted of Alfred Kroeber, Thomas T. Waterman, and Saxton T. Pope. Just after Ishi's death, Waterman wrote to Kroeber, "I loved the old Indian" (as cited in Starn, 2004, p. 30) and "He was the best friend I had in the world" (as cited in Wilson Buzaljko, 2003, p. 55). Ishi also developed close relationships with Edward Gifford, the assistant curator at the museum who worked closely with Ishi during museum hours; the rest of the museum staff, including guards and janitors; Waterman's and Gifford's families; and with a number of children with whom he spent time on his regular explorations of San Francisco. Based on his archival research on Ishi's relationship with Kroeber and especially with the Waterman family, Schackley goes so far as to write that "Ishi considered them his new family, despite problems of language" (2003, p. 162). Schackley also points out that Charles Kelsey, a Bureau of Indian Affairs Agent, gave Ishi a choice of where he wanted to live, and Ishi "emphatically stated his preference to live out his days among the anthropologists and die in his new home" (2003, p. 163).

There is the question of whether, despite these friendships, Ishi felt exploited. We have no way of knowing. However, there are indications that Ishi was legitimately happy, at least some of the time. Foster gives the example of the month-long trip Ishi took in May 1914 with Pope, eleven-year-old Saxton Pope, Jr., Kroeber, and Waterman to his most recent Yahí home. Ishi was originally opposed to the trip, but “quickly was caught up in the excitement of the occasion and happily demonstrated to his friends many aspects of his former life” (2003, p. 95). Foster finds further evidence of Ishi’s happiness in photographs from the trip and in Saxton Jr.’s description of the trip to Foster’s wife in the mid-1950s (2003, pp. 95-96).

An even stronger indication of Ishi’s happiness comes from those who knew him during their own childhood in San Francisco. Many of these accounts were unknown when Theodora Kroeber published *Ishi in Two Worlds*. After its publication, however, she received visits, telephone calls, and letters from these individuals. One such letter, written by Fred H. Zumwalt Jr., shows the extent to which Ishi was able to escape from the vestment of documents for periods of time, as well as the ways that the weight of that vestment could suddenly reappear. The narratives in the letters from these children were personal; Zumwalts’ letters, in particular, are known for their richness. For this reason, I will quote from one of his letters at length:

Perhaps few readers of your charming book about Ishi have the pleasant memories of him that I do. As a very small boy Ishi was not only something of a hero to me but also a delightful playmate. He made a small bow and arrows with which he taught me to shoot lizards, a willow seine for catching minnows and soft rabbit skin moccasins with the fur on the inside. We spent hours calling quail and wild ducks and stalking rabbits. ...

One memorable day in 1915 my mother took us both to the Fair and we were equally entranced by driving our own ‘bug.’ On that day the Indian Exhibit was closed to the public and we were the guests of those Indians who were here from other parts of the country. The movie of Ishi was shown and tribal dances were performed for our benefit. As I remember, we were the only two outsiders and during the showing of the movie Ishi and I sat alone in the auditorium. This must have been one of the last times that I saw Ishi, but I can recall how proud he was that day to receive some sort of honor from the other Indians and to be my host.

He was a kind, gentle, understanding and patient man, given over to laughter at my clumsy efforts to copy him; ... As I recall, he once went with my family on a picnic, near Lagunitas, and made some sort of a trap in the creek out of twigs set closely together that small fish could be driven into it and penned for a time. We caught two or three trout in the trap, which pleased him immensely (2003, pp. 11-12).

Zumwalt's letter is a window into the considerable freedom Ishi was able to enjoy in San Francisco and the pleasure Ishi seemed to get from his friendships. In moments like those described by Zumwalt, Ishi appears to do what he enjoys and seems genuinely happy about it. Yet, even in this freedom, Ishi finds himself watching one of the secondary documents created about him. Zumwalt does not provide any insight into Ishi's response to that movie. Perhaps the lack of reaction on what was otherwise clearly an enjoyable day for Ishi is telling, but that is speculation. It is important to recognize that what Zumwalt recalls here is his childhood experience of Ishi. It is possible that he did not perceive Ishi's vestment of documents. Yet, in another letter, Zumwalt recognizes that Ishi was not a child and has a clear sense of what he approved of and did not (2003, pp. 14-15). This gives the impression that even as a child Zumwalt recognized Ishi for who he was.

This overview of Ishi's friendships tells us much about how other people experienced Ishi as a document. With children like Zumwalt, Ishi did not appear to have been viewed as a document. In fact, in his two letters, the closest Zumwalt gets to connecting Ishi to his anthropological or public role is the recollection that his father "often drove [Ishi] back to the Affiliated Colleges in the evening..." (2003, p. 14). To a child, the university museum was simply Ishi's home. The same, however, cannot be said of his other friends. This is where the eeriness of Ishi as a document is most explicit. Ishi's status as an anthropological evidence was, of course, an ongoing complication in his relationship with anthropologists. Two stories indicate moments of increasing tension in these relationships. The first concerns his living quarters. Despite Schackley's reassurance that Ishi told Charles Kelsey that he wanted to live among the anthropologists and die in his new home, there is significant evidence that Ishi was manifestly uncomfortable there. The room in which he lived was right next to the room where the museum displayed mummies and other bones. Pope described how

the presence of all the bones of the dead, their belongings, and the mummies were ever a source of anxiety to him. He locked his bedroom door at night to keep out spirits. When we stored our camping provender temporarily in the Museum bone room, Ishi was not only disgusted [but] genuinely alarmed. It was only after the reassurance that the 'bunch a mi si tee' could not enter through the tin of the cans that he was relieved (as cited in Wilson Buzaljko, 2003, p. 53).

Despite Ishi's very real fears related to his deceased next-door neighbors, the anthropologists never found a home for him outside the museum.

The more consequential story concerns the events surrounding his death. Ishi was adamantly against autopsy and dissection and he explicitly said he wanted



to have his body buried in a traditional ritual. Kroeber fully supported him in this, going so far as to write “If there is any talk about the interests of science, say for me that science can go to hell. We propose to stand by our friends,” in an urgent telegram to Gifford, reminding him of Ishi’s wishes (as cited in Scheper-Hughes, 2003, p. 114). However, Kroeber was away when Ishi died, and another of Ishi’s friends, Saxton Pope went ahead with the autopsy and removed the brain. Surprisingly, when Kroeber returned, he agreed to send the brain to the Smithsonian. No one really knows why Kroeber changed his mind on this matter, but there is strong evidence that it resulted from “disordered mourning, of ravaged grief” (Scheper-Hughes, 2003, p. 115). Kroeber suffered numerous physical symptoms over the next seven years. He left his duties at the museum and even, for a time, the field of anthropology altogether. He also never wrote the history of Ishi and his people, which, from an anthropological point of view, should have been the result of his work with Ishi. Where did friendship end and anthropological or medical study begin in these last moments of Ishi’s life and the immediate aftermath? In Pope’s case, Ishi appears to have quickly reverted to a document. It is much more difficult to tell with Kroeber, but whatever happened in the moment he agreed to preserve Ishi’s brain, Kroeber clearly valued Ishi’s friendship and did not cope well with his death.

#### ISHI’S DOCUMENTALITY

In these relationships, Ishi experienced becoming more or less a document on a fairly regular basis throughout the last years of his life. At points, this fluctuation between “more or less” depended on Ishi’s own agency. At other points, this fluctuation depended on decisions made by Ishi’s friends. This brings us to Ishi’s “documentality,” a concept first articulated by Bernd Frohmann. Frohmann builds on Briet’s concept of the document to argue that

in complex arrangements *things* exercise documentary agency, which is capable of being detected, understood, and engaged in many different ways, and by many different kinds of actors, both human and nonhuman. The problem is to show how a thing’s documentary agency, power or force—which I call its documentality—is exercised by virtue of those arrangements (2012, p. 173).

Ignoring for the time being the problems associated with describing Ishi as a “thing”—which reflects the ethical problem mentioned earlier concerning a human as a document—Frohmann’s documentality provides insight into Ishi’s fluctuation between more or less a document and helps to explain the role of agency in Ishi’s documentary status.

Documentality, according to Frohmann has four important features: its function, exhibiting “varying degrees of intensity in its modes of operation” (2012, 174); its historical contingency; its complexity; and finally, its agency. Each of these features is apparent in the Ishi story. Though a full exploration of each of these features as applied to Ishi must be left for another time, a brief overview of the historical contingencies—Frohmann’s second feature—surrounding Ishi are instructive. The phenomenon of Ishi could have only happened in the time and place that it did. As the Department of Anthropology at Berkeley stated in a letter issued during the repatriation controversy, Ishi’s family and cultural group “were murdered as part of the genocide that characterized the influx of western settlers to California” (Brandes, 1999, p. 2). This influx of settlers and the decimation of Indigenous populations in California led directly to Ishi’s appearance in the Oroville slaughterhouse. Meanwhile, anthropology only emerged in its institutional form in the late nineteenth century and Kroeber was Franz Boas’ first doctoral student in this still young field. His arrival in California, bringing with him Boasian anthropology, led directly to Ishi living in a museum. The portability and cheap cost of wax cylinder machines at the time led directly to this technology as the primary means for recording Ishi’s stories and songs. Ishi only became a document with certain secondary documents because of this unique confluence of historical trajectories.

Frohmann uses documentality to recognize that things, in and of themselves, are of secondary importance. What is most important is the “mental representations we gain from [them] and then transfer to some tangible medium” (2012, p. 175). This is what gives things agency that they exercise “in the varying intensities of [their] capacity to produce, afford, allow, encourage, permit, influence, render possible, block, or forbid the generation of marks, traces or inscriptions in its arrangement with other things” (Frohmann, 2012, p. 175). Ishi’s fluctuation in documentality is a reflection of the various arrangements in which he found himself. The arrangements that most intensely exhibit his documentality are, perhaps, in the museum, while demonstrating flintknapping techniques in front of a crowd, or alternatively, once dead as part of Pope’s autopsy. In the Presidio reservation, however, catching frogs with Zumwalt, the arrangements surrounding Ishi were those that least intensely exhibited his documentality.

Frohmann recognizes an ethical component in documentality, one that he does not develop but gestures toward. The clues he provides are instructive in answering the questions: what does Ishi’s story have to offer beyond a sense of novelty? Why does it matter that Ishi is a document? Frohmann draws on Heidegger’s “age of the world picture” to appreciate the enormity of what is at stake in documentality. In this age, being itself becomes representation, just as Ishi the man is hidden behind Ishi the representation. Just as experience in web environments becomes a global condition, so to do the anthropologists, in this age

of the world picture, have a “hallucinatory desire to make something present not only stand in for something absent but also to make it, experientially, equivalent to what has gone missing, remains elsewhere, or can never be” (Hillis as cited in Frohmann, 2012, p. 180). Frohmann’s second gesture, referring to the thoughts of Michel Serres, alerts us to the dangers of forgetting the fragile world of being behind the representations of the world picture. This world is not just the natural world, but human selves with their own fragilities.

Human fragility is found most especially in our suffering, which Ricoeur tells us is “not defined solely by physical pain, nor even by mental pain, but by the reduction, even the destruction, of the capacity for acting, of being-able-to act, experienced as a violation of self-integrity” (1992, p. 190). Ishi’s documentality derives its ethical orientation from precisely this kind of suffering, hidden behind his representation. In its least intense form, his documentality permitted his ability to act, to will certain things. In its most intense form, his documentality destroyed this ability. Suffering by itself is not ethics, but it sets up the conditions for solicitude or what Ricoeur calls “benevolent spontaneity,” which belongs to “the self who *gives* his sympathy, his compassion, these terms being taken in the strong sense of the wish to share someone else’s pain” (1992, p. 190). Ishi did experience this solicitude. Waterman, like Kroeber, was distraught after Ishi’s death, blaming himself for the conditions that led to that end.

If Heidegger’s age of the world picture is indeed the world in which we live, understanding documentality becomes ethically important. Though we, in our own lived situations, exist at the intersection of functions and historical contingency that are different than Ishi’s, the arrangements of our lives still often resemble Ishi’s. We too are often hidden behind our representations in Buckland’s “document society,” where our “social interactions” are “increasingly indirect and through documents” (2017, p. 1). In this world, our suffering may be forgotten, and thus, the conditions for our ethical solicitude to each other may be neglected.

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