Ishi: the Last of the Yahi: A UC Berkeley Production that Perpetuates Gross Violences Against Native Peoples

In Guest Posts, Ishi Last of the Yahi, Manifest Destiny, stereotypes, Theater, Tria Andrews, violences against Native Peoples by Adrienne K. / March 7, 2012 / 18 Comments

(Program and ticket from the play “Ishi: The Last of the Yahi. Above the ticket, notice the word “Squaw. Also, note the pins thrust into Ishi’s body as if he were in an insect collection.)

AK Note: Please welcome guest blogger Tria Andrews.
Tri a is a mixed race Cherokee, Irish, and Filipina writer who has published critical essays, fiction, poetry, and photography. She is a graduate of the MFA program in Fiction from San Diego State University, a Shinnyo Fellow, and a PhD student in Ethnic Studies at UC Berkeley, where she teaches Asian American and Native American Studies. Her current research examines culturally relevant forms of rehabilitation for Native American youth in juvenile detention centers located on tribal grounds. This research is informed by over five years of tutoring and teaching yoga to incarcerated adolescents.

This past weekend marked two events held at UC Berkeley which presented conflicting representations of the violences that have occurred against Native peoples in the U.S. In her keynote address for the Empowering Women of Color Conference, "On Revolution: A Conversation Between Grace Lee Boggs and Angela Davis," Davis foregrounded her talk by emphasizing, "I would like to begin by acknowledging the indigenous people, who are the original inhabitants of the land on which we meet. . . . And let us never forget that our presence here is very much related to the genocidal violence inflicted on this area's Native people, and if we believe in justice, we must stand for justice for Native people in the 21st century."

In contrast, the play, *Ishi: The Last of the Yahi*, which opened March 2, attempts to justify the gross violences committed against Native peoples through its portrayal of Ishi as a batterer, murderer, and rapist. While arguably the production evidences some meager attempts to provide a more nuanced version of history, ultimately, the play endeavors to erase not only Ishi, but also all Native peoples, who through the production's monolithic representation of Native Americans are conflated with the Yahi. When the play is not depicting Native peoples as extinct, it suggests that Native Americans are not “survivors” or “victims,” but instead, were asking for it: “Maybe Manifest Destiny was a two-way street.”

Manifest Destiny was certainly not a two-way street; it was a colonial policy aimed at annihilating Native peoples, traditions, and cultures and usurping Native Americans of their lands in the name of “progress.” The attempts of dominant discourses to render Native peoples extinct to justify the continued occupation of Native lands is unfortunately one reason that Ishi may be a compelling story for non-Native audiences. The dominant and Non-native archive, which was utilized for the production, “a work of fiction based on fact,” perpetuates a tiresome story told from the point of view of the aggressor. Despite the fact that Native peoples associated with UC Berkeley have been addressing the complexities of Ishi’s story, it appears that no Native Americans were consulted for the play. Given the exploitative and dehumanizing relationship of UC Berkeley with Native populations in the past, the university has been working hard to repair the relationship that the institution has with Native peoples. However, the play seems completely oblivious to these activities and the important work that Native activists have been doing to seek restitution and reconciliation. Instead, the play causes further violences to Ishi and Native communities.

While the play pretends to present disparate and diverse versions of history—to speak from Ishi’s perspective—in truth, the production is about the European-American characters going native. Going native, as defined by Native scholar and UC Berkeley Professor, Shari Huhndorf, is a trope aimed at alleviating White guilt regarding the violent founding of the nation while simultaneously reinforcing White supremacy. While constructed around the character of Ishi,
whose image is exploited on the production's brochure, the protagonist of the play is in fact Dr. Alfred Kroeber, the primary anthropologist who studied Ishi. By purporting to be a play about the last of the Yahi (underscored by the play’s title), the production diminishes White guilt by representing Native peoples as extinct and Whites as the rightful owners of the land. In the falling action of the play, Ishi’s ghost—after his body is dismembered and dispersed throughout numerous institutions in the U.S. against his wishes—rises from the dead and assumes the third person plural, “we.” Here, Ishi’s adoption of “we” endeavors to downplay the violences against Native peoples, which the play in fact fetishizes. In other words, after his death, Ishi supposedly becomes a White man and in doing so, attempts to warrant the dispossession of Native peoples from their land.

While the play’s concluding characterization of Ishi as a European-American commits yet another horrific act of violence against Ishi, unfortunately, the play also fetishizes violence to Native characters’ bodies—or the bodies or non-Native actors playing Indian. The opening scene reveals a Native man in a loincloth who is chased by a White man wielding a gun. The White man is starving and intends to murder and eat the Indian. This action takes place both center stage and off stage as the actors circle the audience and whoop. One character warns another not to “pollute the [Indian’s] flesh with bullets.” These scenes of gruesome violence are staged as spectacle and rationalized in the narrative. Three White men brutally murder an Indian man, whose death the audience witnesses in scene. The Indian is beaten, tied to a stake, knifed, and finally, set on fire. This dramatization of violence, like others throughout the play, is accompanied by the bloodcurdling screams of the Indian characters. At one point in the play, while European-American characters are brutally beating an Indian, an image of a White woman wrested by two Native men is projected center stage to seemingly justify the violence committed against the Indian. As the play makes clear, the violences against Native peoples continue postmortem as Native remains are stored in museums and universities, such as UC Berkeley, which currently houses 12,000 human skeletons. However, the production commits even further violences. Through Ishi’s perspective, Native remains are labeled “evil,” and the housing of these bodies in museums and institutions is presented as an unavoidable and resolved circumstance, which is certainly not the case given the 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act.
Considering the immense violences that Native peoples—and in particular Native women—continue to endure from non-Natives, violent scenes, which are unsparingly utilized in the performance, reveal disgusting and insulting displays of ignorance. European-American men and Ishi himself beat and threaten Native women or "squaw[s]" as the cast list derogatorily refers to one of the female characters. In the play, Native women, unlike their European-American counterparts (with the exception of Dr. Saxton Pope, M.D. who goes native, donning a two piece buckskin ensemble while simulating masturbation), are not only sexualized, but also beaten and raped. The depiction of Native American women as promiscuous, their bodies, like the land, seducing European-Americans, is yet another racist trope that the production cannot resist. Ishi’s narrative, which the main characters expend most of the play attempting to extract from Ishi, is presented in two versions, both of which render a Yahi woman, Ishi’s sister, as incestuous, murderous, and inherently rapeable. Rape, as Cherokee activist and writer Andrea Smith highlights, is a tool of conquest. Yet, the production portrays Native men as rapists and Native women as enjoying their violability because of their cultural upbringing: "Copulate and rape are not different words in Yahi." This Western, patriarchal portrayal of violence against Yahi’s sister, who revels in her own rape so much so that she seeks out her rapist—also her parents’ murderer—as a lover and father for her child, is absolutely inexcusable. Yet another irresponsible scene conflates violence with sexuality as Ishi is positioned behind his sister in a manner that suggests intercourse while the two work together to commit infanticide. To add insult to injury, the production completely misrepresents Native conceptions of “balance” or harmony, insisting, “There's balance in all [Ishi’s] stories.”

But in Ishi: The Last of the Yahi, Ishi’s so-called stories are not his own. They are stories of Ishi narrated through a Western lens. I could continue by citing the multiple violences against Ishi and Native peoples that the play commits and which I have not yet specified: unproblematizing privilege and power dynamics; portraying Ishi as childlike, savage, and subordinate; reinforcing racial and gender binaries, etc., but I want to conclude in a way that is more useful.
As a mixed race (Cherokee, Irish, and Filipina) woman, who identifies as indigenous and who was required to watch this production for a class, I want the director, cast, and crew to try to understand what it was like to be a Native person in the audience. The jolt sent up my spine when I read word “squaw” in the cast list, the knot that took root in my stomach and held while I witnessed the gunning down of an Indian in the opening scene, the stiffening of my shoulders when I was surrounded by staged violence accompanied by the villainous laughter and whoops of European-American characters in a play that professes to treat the history of our nation and the mass murdering of Native peoples as “gray matter.” It would have been impossible for me to sit through the play without writing back to it. Within the first few minutes, I began taking notes on my checkbook—the only paper I had. Although I wanted to leave the theater almost immediately, was determined to leave at intermission, a friend and former journalist convinced me a review would have more credibility if I watched the entire production.

**Recommendations:**

All that I have written here, I write without hesitation. I write what I witnessed and what I feel and know with all my being to be true. I understand that long hours and hard work were required to make a production such as *Ishi: The Last of the Yahi*, but because of the gross violences that this production perpetuates against Native peoples, I recommend that all further performances be canceled in order to create the time and space necessary for a dialog among Native peoples, the play’s director and writer, John Fisher, his cast, crew, and the campus community. If at an institution such as UC Berkeley we are truly committed to diversity and learning, I see no other alternative.

**Please sign the petition to cancel the remaining performances here.**


You can also email the Director, John Fisher at jofish94117@yahoo.com (mailto:jofish94117@yahoo.com).

(Thanks Kayla and Tria!)
lifeboat 5 years ago

I think you make some good points here, but I saw a different production of this same play (by the same director/writer, but not at UC Berkeley), and I had the opposite interpretation of some of what you saw. For example, I thought the depiction of the violence against the Native Americans showed how horrible the white characters were, not how weak the Native characters were. I grew up in California, and never knew until I saw this play how extreme the violence against Native Americans was—we learned about Ishi’s basic story in 4th or 5th grade, but all of that information was covered up. I can see your argument that the violence is "fetishized" in the play, but I think one could also argue that dramatizing that aspect of the story is a way to communicate the horror of what really happened.

The projection of the white woman being attacked was not used in the version of the play I saw, but knowing the people involved in the show, I think it was probably meant to show the white characters' imaginary ideas about Native Americans—the specter of the "colored" rapist was in common usage at the time. It sounds like a misguided addition to this production, but I wouldn’t assume the producers were intending to justify the violence against indigenous peoples. I am sure that this was not their intention. If it came across this way, that was a huge mistake on their part.

KaylaCarpenter 5 years ago

The play wasn’t cancelled. We got to put an insert in the playbook and have participated in two public discussions. Many people still can’t see why telling a story of Genocide, in which the real survivors such as Ishi are accused of being perpetrators of violence, is problematic. Ishi is incestuous, kills two babies, doesn’t know the difference between rape and sex since apparently Kroeber & Waterman didn’t elicit lexical items (I’m a linguist). Ishi’s father hits him, Ishi hates him. Ishi/the playwright justifies all this through a view of California Indian culture as degenerate, and Ishi, also, is the last of his people, a fiction Kroeber created and was recognized as such when the Smithsonian repatriated Ishi’s remains finally in 2000 to Yana people. Ishi worships white women, is the butt of many jokes, probes about the sexual lives of white characters, speaks in a Tarzan voice, has a love of donuts that’s a running joke in the play, acts out these scenes of sex/rape wearing fake spirit hoodie/coyote regalia. The violences border on pornography of violence, as voiced to me by a white film-maker who left early when I watched it, while at other times, is set to cartoon music? I want you to know that for Native (and Chicano students too I am told), the play itself and working through the fallout, has been a traumatic experience amplified by the audience’s and campus’s participation/lack of awareness in the whole thing. If the intention was one thing,

Watkajtys 5 years ago

I know this is going to come off as rude but by what stretch are you an "native" or "indigenous" person? Two of the two groups you identify with arrived in the last two hundred years or so and the third migrated a few thousand years ago. There are no "indigenous" humans in the americas, only migrants who came in different periods.

Sorry it bugs me because it implies something that just isn’t so.

As to the play I understand why you are offended and with a few exceptions you have very good points.
Some things in the play I think you have misinterpreted. This is understandable because it came off to you in a certain context so you looked at some words and heard them in that context. The "two way street" line for instance. It is very clear that the two way street refers to the damage done to the perpetrator of a crime by the very commission of that crime. It's one of a series on analogies so it's really not vague. The whole speech is about how the various perpetrators of various crimes are damaged by the commission of the crime and ends with the manifest destiny line.

your bigger point I think is that it doesn't really matter what the playwright was trying to do. He either did something bad or tried to do something right but did it badly. In the end for you it was a failure.

KaylaCarpenter → Watkajtys · 5 years ago
10,000+ years is a long time for a group to be considered migrant. Rethink that one...

Sandra Johnson O. · 5 years ago
I'm a Native filmmaker and am shocked that Berkeley would allow such a film to be shown. Activists everywhere have a high regard for Berkeley due to its proud history in advancing the rights of people. What is happening there? Where are the ethnic studies people? Where are the scholars, the professors? This play should be shut down, based on this review, unless Berkeley is vying to become the most racist university in the country. I'm sorry, this is about MORE than diversity. Berkeley, have you no sense for human decency, for human rights, for the dignity of all people? Unbelievable!

lifeboat → Sandra Johnson O. · 5 years ago
It's a play, not a film.

Cecilibarnard · 5 years ago
As a UCB student I am deeply saddened by the lack of respect given to the Native American community and I cannot believe that such a horribly offensive and insensitive play is endorsed by the UC Berkeley Department of Theater, Dance and Performance Studies. This kind of "art" was successful in one respect- it very effectively perpetuates age-old violent stereotypes imposed by racist colonials. Thank you Tia Andrews for your most eloquent review and I'm truly sorry you had to witness something so hurtful.

Watkajtys → Cecilibarnard · 5 years ago
It's those "racist colonists" who have the "violent stereotypes" imposed on them. Maybe next time see what you comment on rather than going by a review.

Cecilibarnard → Cecilibarnard · 5 years ago
*Tri

Kat · 5 years ago
What an absolute clusterfuckbomb of awfulness.

Haidagurl · 5 years ago
Good lord. It's like that school cannot stop desecrating that guy. First his body, then his memory. Ughhhhh!!!
Erin Winslow · 5 years ago

WTF!!! Sometimes I HATE people and this is one of them.

Δ | ¦ Share ›

Ally · 5 years ago

Is "Maybe Manifest Destiny was a two-way street" an actual quote from the play?! Bloody hell...

Δ | ¦ Share ›

AyK → Ally · 5 years ago

Seriously. The only way that quote would be remotely acceptable is if a character said it and then another character immediately smacked him upside the head for his stupidity. Not even going into the rest of the play (which just seems to get worse and worse the more that I read), I cannot imagine how someone could read that line and not realize that maybe this play is just a little problematic.

I signed the petition and forwarded it on to friends. I hope UC Berkeley gets their collective heads on right.

3 Δ | ¦ Share ›

Watkatjys → AyK · 5 years ago

I thought students were thought to think for them selves, maybe do a little research, find some facts??

I guess today it’s good enough if you can find a twitter comment.

The manifest destiny comment as used in the review is taken completely out of context and implied to mean the exact opposite of what it very obviously means in the play.

The second way of the two way street is that by destroying a culture it damaged the culture of the offender. It’s not really ambiguous in the play but it makes a damn good sound bite out of context.

So who is now printing fiction and calling it fact?

2 Δ | ¦ Share ›

KaylaCarpenter → Watkatjys · 5 years ago

This entire play is out of context. That line does not come across so strongly the way you would intend and that intention does not align with the rest of the play. If you want to quibble about quotes, its in horrible taste after three hours like this...

[Ishi: What happened before was rape, he raped you. Woman (Ishi sister): Like when you raped me, what is forbidden is ok, so long as we are disguised. (Holding up a deer mask spirit-hoodie thing...) See, I have my disguise. I am a fawn. .... Ishi: You can’t. He forced you to do it. Woman: And it will be wrong if I don’t go to him. Then it will be rape, this makes it all right. First I was unwilling, now I am willing. This makes it all right.]

Ishi and his family are not blank slates to insert a story of rape, incest, domestic violence, two instances of infanticide, or any other projections of him being a perpetrator of violence... Nor is it ok to say that under the pressure of consilience the culture he was a part of...
Ah quotes. Priceless when you can't think for your self.

This is like Dan Quale complaining about Murphy Brown.

IF this were a work of fact you would have a point. Since it's a work of fiction you don't.

On a related topic someone pointed out that Palin never actually said she could see Russia out her window. It was Tina Fey playing Palin who said that.

Now I guess you could mount a protest because that "quote" hurt her reputation. But you would be laughed at because it was a fictional portrayal.

You can hate the play but acting like someone published a biography that was slander is just???? Silly?

those aren't Kroeber's words either. Phoebe Hearst would probably have been mortally offended also. And again those weren't her words. The doctor was a man in real life.

So there are plenty of folks to be offended and yet you don't have a problem with any of it except Ishi.

Kroeber is portrayed as killing his wife.

If you want to go and defend "truth" in fiction at least really do it.

1

KaylaCarpenter → Watkajts · 5 years ago

I am in Linguistics. I know who Kroeber is... If you are suggesting I contact his descendants, I can do that. They actually do feel they have some kind of stake in righting the consequences of his actions that affect people to this day, and in his legacy.

Are these her words, Ishi's sister, nameless Woman? And are any words Ishi's words? Of course not. If you'd like to listen to some, they are available.

Are these words, and the play, a form of knowledge production about Ishi and California tribal people though? Yes! Try talking people out of thinking THIS IS ISHI as I have done on an individual basis with people... or the converse, that he actually existed.

Do these words reflect upon the department, or parts of it, given they paid for and approved of this production? Yes.

Are these words Fisher's since he wrote it, without much consideration that tribal people yet exist, and may be in his

see more

Watkajts → KaylaCarpenter · 5 years ago

I don't actually mean to insult you but this is a bit ridiculous. You didn't like the play and it's a problem because stupid people think it's a documentary? Come ON. If all art has to get vetted through the filter of what stupid people might believe about things afterward then you couldn't do ANYTHING.

Works of art and even some supposed works of fact often take liberties sometimes great ones. Adults are supposed to be able to make some distinctions. I doubt highly that you would get up in
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Right now the website is under construction, so please excuse the mess!

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Valentino didn't learn anything. (http://nativeappropriations.com/2017/03/valentino-didnt-learn-anything.html)


Dear little one on your Birthday: A letter to a future Native warrior (http://nativeappropriations.com/2016/11/dear-little-one.html)

#NoDAPL: Updates, resources, and reflections (http://nativeappropriations.com/2016/11/nodapl-updates-resources-and-reflections.html)
Amazing what happens when you let Indigenous people look after our own environment.

Beacon Hill bill calls foul on the mascots. bostonherald.com/news/local_pol... (pic of @DeLaBraids and quotes from me!)

@DeLaBraids

Dr. Adrienne Keene
@NativeApprops

Beacon Hill bill calls foul on the mascots.

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