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The Romances of Ishi: A Mark of Civilization or Savagery?

In August of 1911, a Native American man, who was identified as the last surviving member of the Yahi tribe, made headlines after his appearance in Oroville, California. His discovery followed the California Genocide, which was a series of massacres carried out by white settlers against native tribes between 1840 and 1870 (Madley). The history of racially-motivated murders and rapid depletion of life was mostly removed from public consciousness in light of the publicized entrance of the “wild man” into civilization. The Yahi man was transported to the museum of University of California, Berkeley. During his years living at the museum, he was informally placed under the study of Berkeley anthropologist Alfred Kroeber and given the name Ishi, which meant “man.” Under the guise of scientific study, Ishi’s haunting past was probed by Kroeber and collaborative anthropologists in an attempt to uncover aspects of his identity that were deemed “lost” by the onset of colonization. The belief that Ishi was a living representation of extinct native culture paved the path toward a different intellectual approach which Indonesian film director Fatimah Tobing Rony refers to as “ethnographic taxidermy. ” By this approach, anthropologists believed they were able to freeze native culture in its pure state in order to “reconstruct them as they had once been and excuse themselves from documenting either the bloody story of conquest or the trauma, poverty, upheaval, and disjunctions of native experience as it actually was” (Starn 182).

While the idea of studying Ishi's culture and identity in its original context was certainly progressive, what was actually "learned" about Ishi was not entirely empirical and impartial. Cultural anthropologist Orin Starn describes the destabilized relationship between anthropologists and their native subjects as one of "parasitic disciplinary dependence." The credibility of the fieldwork done on Ishi is undermined by its goal of uncovering biological differences that can be used to construct divisions of race. The reality was a majority of anthropologists prioritized producing a narrative of Ishi that would appeal to consumer interest. As a result, the scholarly works created in the decades following Ishi's appearance were centered around the narrative of him as "The Last Savage Man." The contemporary scholars of Ishi treated the wild Indian stereotype as a truth on which they faithfully based their studies upon. This stereotype alienated Ishi as a Yahi Man within the racialized Other, which was a social category that conflated indigenesness and native culture as markings of savagery and inferiority.

Over the course of the last century, scholars began to look into Ishi's life to analyze how Ishi's modern identity was shaped away from unmentioned history of the California Genocide. Humanities scholar Richard Pascal explains how the "incomplete beads" within Ishi's troubled past led contemporary scholars to propose "scientific" truths and interpretations that would draw attention away from civilization's crimes. As a modern scholar, Pascal criticizes how the perceived "incompleteness" of Ishi's character made his identity susceptible to distortion through the Western lens. The dominating narrative of Ishi as the "last man of stone" was built upon the projection of Indian stereotypes and costumes onto his body. American studies professor Gerald Vizenor brings this misrepresentation of Ishi to light by comparing the public's view of Ishi to overproduced snapshots that sought to capture the aesthetics of native wildness. As stated by the article title "Ishi Obscura", Vizenor argues that there was so much more to Ishi's hidden character,

as his culture and wisdom were immeasurable by the probing Western lens. Native American historian William J. Bauer offers a different less romanticized view of Ishi's treatment in modern civilization, equating the anthropology and pseudoscience of the period to the act of hunting Ishi.



Figure 1. "The Romance of Ishi"

A narrowed focus on Ishi's publicized romances with white women potentially expands this discourse by analyzing how his identity within the racialized Other is constructed. A poem titled "The Romance of Ishi" was published by an unknown poet from Campus College in the San

Francisco call in January of 1912 (Figure 1). The poem was written in response to circulating rumors of how Ishi, the lonely savage man, achieved human emotion and became tamed through the affections of a white woman. On the surface level, this work is a representation of public reactions towards outsiders of civilization. More importantly, it signifies a larger effort to deny humanity by equating Ishi's native identity to ideas of innate savagery and backwardness. While the love affair between Ishi and the civilized woman suggests his cultural transformation within modern civilization, it ironically dehumanizes him by imposing the caricature of the wild man.

"The Romance of Ishi" isolates Ishi as a man in the wilderness to build his modern identity upon his apparent Otherness. The first attempts to portray Ishi in the state of nature are in the poem's introduction, which briefs the audience on Ishi's fifty years of "untrammled bachelor life in the Mountains of the Sierra." This presentation of Ishi as a lone inhabitant from the mountains isolates him within the natural landscape and removes him from modern time. Ishi's oneness with nature is complicated by the juxtaposition of him in the mountains and his label as a bachelor. Labeling Ishi as a bachelor is contradictory because it is a social distinction that not only interrupts the naturesque narrative of Ishi, but also has underlying negative cultural connotations. The absence of an explanation of civilization's destructive role in the decimation of native populations leads the audience to associate his bachelor status with his uncivilized nature. The focus on Ishi's decades of bachelor status becomes not how he reached that state, but about how he is expected to act after decades of social and sexual exclusion. The poet continues to develop Ishi's tensioned savage state, describing, "Ishi was a lonely man, / And led a lonely life; / He had no kith, he had no kin, / No children and no wife." In these first lines, the poem seemingly moves the audience toward pity by reiterating Ishi in the lonely state of nature. The depressing reality of Ishi as a kinless man is not translated into the first image, where Ishi is comedically portrayed as a sad man

with his overly large head in his palms. His bent posture and the inward angle of his limbs communicate a sense of closedness and defeat. As a result, the pity that the audience experiences is a response to the harsh and unfruitful quality of life in the wilderness rather than the silenced tragedy of native genocide. This emphasis on Ishi's suffering in nature is used to reframe his romance as his liberation from nature.

The poem also imposes the racial stereotype of the savage man by reconstructing a physical image of Ishi as the generic Indian. This caricature of Ishi is developed in the first image, where he is depicted in "native" style clothing. The tattered and worn condition of the cloth is a reflection of Ishi's uncivilized lifestyle in nature. Orin Starn critiques the conflating power of variations of the "faux primitive loincloth" for their destructive ability to confine how civilized people imagine the racialized Other. The lack of evidence for the existence of Yahi "faux primitive loincloth" reveals how the native clothing is an imposed marking of "indigenoussness" rather than an authentic expression of native culture. The depiction of Ishi in this generic Indian costume resonates with the cultural imagination of the audience while simultaneously erasing the diversity in native appearances. This savage presentation of Ishi deepens the gap between the civilized and uncivilized by representing his savage nature as something tangible such as clothing.

Ishi's makeshift Yahi bow completes the savage Indian costume by serving as a symbol of primitiveness and his past identity. The first image shows Ishi holding a wooden bow in its simplest form. In his detailed observations of Ishi's craft of weaponry, Dennis Torres challenges the public misconception that Ishi managed to survive with the basic bows and arrows. Torres recognizes how Ishi's museum demonstrations of making simple wooden bows led to a widespread underestimation of his technical abilities. In reality, Ishi relied on weapon innovation to survive, which involved crafting arrowheads from obsidian and glass obtained from city trash. The lack of

acknowledgement of his prowess in weapon making contributes to the narrative of Ishi as the uncivilized man. The depiction of Ishi holding the primitive bow reinforces his identity as a powerless victim against the force of civilization, rather than that of an adaptive survivor against racial violence. In the context of this poem, the primitive Yahi bow is not only a reflection of Native American stereotypes but also a permanent marking of Ishi's own backwardness. Starn recognizes the significance of such cultural symbols as evidence of Social Darwinism, which theorizes an evolutionary hierarchy within the human race. The collection of primitive symbols within the generic Indian costume such as the bow and tattered cloth thus become visual evidence used to dismiss natives as “‘diggers’ at the bottom of human evolution’s putative totem pole” (Starn).

The suppressive power of Ishi's romance on his savage appetite recasts the relationship between Ishi and his lover as that between the colonizer and the colonized. Ishi's love story opens with the claim that he was easily lured by the food of modern civilization. Here, the poet emphasizes the power of the woman's cooking in earning Ishi's affection in order to make a comparison between the uncivilized and civilized lifestyles. This binary is constructed when Mrs. Ishi is described as “the kind / That hates the simple life ; / To have the larder well supplied / She always does contrive.” The “kind” that Mrs. Ishi belongs to is assumed to be civilization, which is pinned in opposition against the “simple life” of Yahi natives. This opposition of civilization and simple life showcases superiority of modern civilization's abundance because of its effectiveness in satisfying Ishi's hunger. To add, Ishi's immersion into civilized society is framed as inevitable, when it is described how the woman's “savory ragouts and entrees have completely captivated the heart of the impressionable savage.” The labelling of Ishi as the “impressionable savage” reinforces Ishi's state of adolescence, as his hunger and survival depends on his civilized woman.

This narrative of the woman who takes Ishi into her care bears a striking resemblance to that of white boarding schools civilizing Native American children (Bear). This allusion to the white man's burden aligns the woman's role with that of the civilizer who must save Ishi from savagery. The civilizing burden works within the context of their relationship because it promotes the role of the woman as a benevolent caretaker. This narrative erases the devastating history of native genocide and replaces it with benevolent assimilation of the savage race. The poem's focus on Ishi's insatiable appetite for food reinforces his native identity as the savage lesser who is uplifted by civilization.

Ishi is further dehumanized within this fictional romance when his appetite for food becomes correlated with his sexual appetite. In the poem's introduction, the juxtaposition of Ishi's "untrammled bachelor life" and his "succumb[ing] to the charms of the civilized woman" leads the audience to expect that Ishi is a man driven by his repressed sexuality. The narrative of his intensified sexual desire reaches its culminating point upon Ishi's entrance into civilization, where he is granted opportunities of romance. The poet describes how Ishi's bachelor life becomes quickly forgotten as he moves "into the matrimonial sea / [where] he makes a daring dive / of woman's skirts the swish he hears daily now, does Ishi." This comparison between Ishi's search for romance to the sea of women's skirts establishes a connection between Ishi and nature's elements. In this case, the seemingly limitless, unrestrained, and forceful quality of the sea is projected onto Ishi's character to mimic the scope and intensity of his sexual desires. On a literal level, the image of Ishi eagerly diving into the "swish" of women's skirts is a disturbing exaggeration of his sexuality that reduces this supposedly civilized romance to savagery.

In its portrayal of Ishi as a wild man with a ravenous appetite for civilization's food and women, "The Romance of Ishi" violates native gender dynamics. Cultural anthropologist Orin

Starn broadly refers to the sexualization of Ishi as one of the “worst prejudices of the age” because of its dehumanizing effects. While Starn is careful to acknowledge the possibility of attraction between Ishi and white women, he recognizes that the majority of the articles written about the “saddle-colored cave man” and white women focused on sensationalizing Ishi’s indigenously to entertain the public with the “fearful, thrilling thought of miscegenation.” As evidence, Starn cites Esther Watson, a frequent observer of Ishi at the university museum, who describes Ishi as “reserved around women” and often “not very comfortable” to engage in social activities such as gambling with women. This silenced narrative of Ishi as a reserved and modest Yahi man reveals the power of public imagination in corrupting native virtue and behavior.

In spite of the evidence that suggests how Ishi’s character was distorted through the civilized lens, the use of animal imagery to describe Ishi’s household portrays his wildness as an innate quality. Even though Ishi appears to be civilized after their romance comes to full fruition, the poet departs the audience with an unsettling wish that states, “Let’s hope that happiness will rule / Within their little hive.” The comparison of their civilized household to a hive brings Ishi’s life in full circle by implying how he inevitably reverts to an animal-like state. The metaphor of the hive also implies that there is a hierarchy within their household, where the civilized woman rules over Ishi and their little Ishis. The description of little Ishis occupying “all the nooks and niches” of their hive draws attention to not only their large numbers, but also to how they adapt to live within their animal state. As a result, Ishi’s children with the civilized women become casted as their own species through the poet’s imagination of their home as an animal habitat.

The hive, which is associated with animal wildness and restlessness, becomes a symbol of Ishi’s savagery. For example, the last image features Ishi getting served a meal by his civilized woman while the little Ishis watch. The ambiguous placement of the children’s heads makes it

unclear as to whether the children are standing behind the table or whether their heads are part of Ishi's meal. In the case of the latter, the illustration strips Ishi entirely of his humanity by showcasing how his barbaric appetite overpowers civilized intervention. This dehumanizing interpretation of Ishi's dining scene captures a dark pessimistic view of civilization toward their outsiders as a separate and inferior kind. This final presentation of Ishi as not civilizable reasserts Starn's concept of the evolutionary totem pole, where the racial hierarchy is accepted as a factual reality. Within his uncivilized hive, Ishi remains separated from the rest of civilization to "lead the chosen life" of savagery.

In its portrayal of Ishi as a stereotypical savage Indian, the poem "The Romance of Ishi" reminages his romance with a white woman as a kind of civilizing mission. The poem appears to offer a happy ending for their union when it describes how the affections of the woman fed Ishi's appetite and allowed him to become civilized. On the other hand, a literary and visual analysis of the poem reveals the destructive quality of this particular narrative because it dehumanizes Ishi as the savage victim in need of civilizing uplift. While the intimate contact between Ishi and his woman appears to bridge the divide between the civilized and uncivilized, their colonizer and colonized dynamic served to highlight Ishi's wild nature. The pitiful depiction of Ishi was necessary not only for public entertainment, but also to remedy civilization's guilt of racial violence. Ishi's romance with the civilized woman comes to represent the paradox of civilization, which is how how it serves as an agent of dehumanization in its improvement of the inferior cultures that make up the racialized Other.

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