

The Word for World is Forest



Field Notes 1.1.18 – 3.2.20
(Towards an Archaeology
of the Future)

Gavin Kroeber

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In late 2017, as record-setting wildfires burned across California and into the national climate imaginary, my thoughts began to gather around a project. The texts and images that follow diagram its structure.

It is oriented toward the intense spaces of California's multiplying burn zones and anchored at a family property in the Napa Valley. Participants—to date, a handful of artists and friends—are invited to move back and forth between these places in a critical exploration of the “Pyrocene”, the so-called age of fire that is emerging as climate change accelerates. The property serves as a kind of base camp, and offers a number of assets to this exploration. In the context of this catalogue, its most salient feature is historic: it was the childhood summer home of Ursula K. Le Guin, my great-aunt, and her parents, the anthropologists Alfred and Theodora Kroeber, my great-grandparents.

For reasons of both circumstance and care, the project has developed slowly and remains highly informal, though this may change soon. The invitation to contribute to this catalogue came at a strange moment of both transition and collapse, as the project was positioned to emerge from incubation into a phase of more public activity, and precisely as the coronavirus crisis forced those plans to be set aside. In many ways, it feels premature to surface the project in a public forum like this, but it is important to find ways to move in quarantine time, and my work is connected to this exhibition by more than a sympathetic adjacency to Ursula's legacy.

The invitation presents an opportunity to reinvigorate conversations with interlocutors like Allison Smith and Sofia Córdova, who have both already generously entangled themselves in this work, and to instigate new dialogues and exchanges with the other exhibition contributors and organizers. To date, this project has operated primarily through intimate acts of gathering, storytelling, exchange, and co-presence. I offer these impressionistic documents of that work in the same spirit.

Many thanks to Naz Cuguoğlu and wei, who worked diligently under short notice and in unusual circumstances to help arrange materials from my archives. All landscape images were taken in or adjacent to burn zones of the Canyon, Nuns, Saddle Ridge, Thomas, and Tubbs Fires.

- I. I am with my brother at the house, but getting ready to leave. We will drive across the Central Valley, to Paradise, to the Camp Fire burn zone. It has been nine months since it burned, nine months since frantic smart-phone footage and smoldering drone shots engulfed the national media. On our way out, approaching the artificially flooded valley of Lake Berryessa, we unwittingly drive through a small burn scar. Everything is pink with fire retardant, dumped from an airplane or helicopter. I didn't know there had been a fire here. I don't know what name this fire was given. There are so many.



- II. I have been visiting burn zones for two years. When I come out to see family, I find moments to drive or hike, to learn what it means to enter these charcoal landscapes. I've come back to some places again and again—two weeks, nine months, a year-and-a-half after they have burned. I am trying to situate these events in longer cycles of time, to attend to the transformations in the land that are slowly unfolding—as resurgent fire ecosystems bloom and speculative real estate recolonizes lost property. This practice indulges the cultural reflex to gaze in at the spectacle of the burns, but in an effort to inhabit these spaces in the long tail of disaster, to take up a position within them and look out at the world.



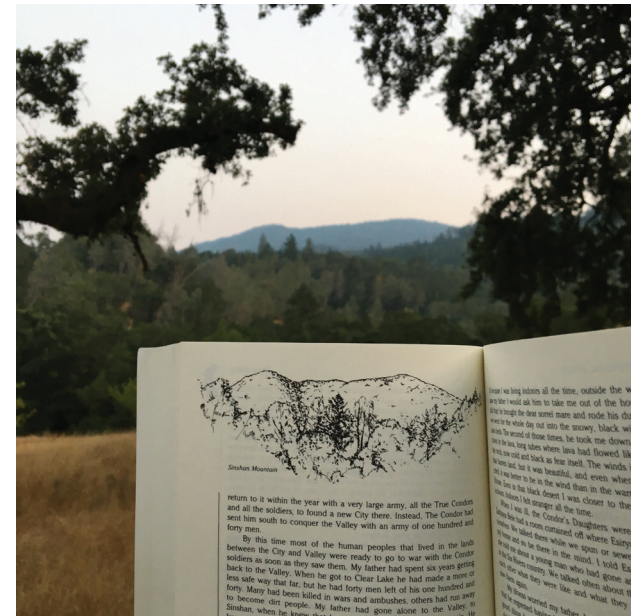


- III. Time on the land is confused. This has always been one of the house's charms. Valley oaks and brown grass make it plain where you are, but when is less clear. Just minutes from the main drag—from steroidal, opulent wineries and industrialized, monocrop vineyards—the unproductive land is only arguably “maintained” in a picturesque state of benign neglect. It can feel like a residual patch of some Old California, before the population booms and the economic transformations... or perhaps a future one, just after people have moved on, as feral forests start to creep in. You can walk from the house to the firebreak where the Nuns Fire was stopped, to the boundary where the New California, Pyrocene California, becomes legible. In proximity to the burn zones yet also at a remove from them, the house and the land around it offer an experiential and temporal counterpoint to those spaces, and a relief from their intensities.



- IV. Ursula worked time on the land, worked the land to cultivate temporal confusion: “The people in this book,” she writes, “might be going to have lived a long, long time from now in Northern California.” The book, a kind of utopian future-ethnography, describes a culture living on the far side of ecological cataclysm—so far on the other side, so post-apocalyptic, that the apocalypse itself has receded into myth. She writes the land into the book. She writes that she found one of their towns there, using a kind of experimental archaeology, a practice of quiet listening rather than excavation. When I stay at the house, moving back and forth between that place and the burn zones, it is hard not to feel I am tracing the front edge of the disaster she worked so hard to think beyond.

“Sinshan Mountain” by
Margaret Chodos-Irvine, in
Ursula K. Le Guin, *Always
Coming Home* (Berkeley:
University of California
Press, 2001), 342.



From top to bottom, right to left:

“Indian California” in Theodora Kroeber, *Ishi in Two Worlds: A Biography of the Last Wild Indian in North America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961) , 14.

“Some of the People and Places Known to the Kesh” by Ursula K. Le Guin, in Ursula K. Le Guin, *Always Coming Home* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001) , 140.

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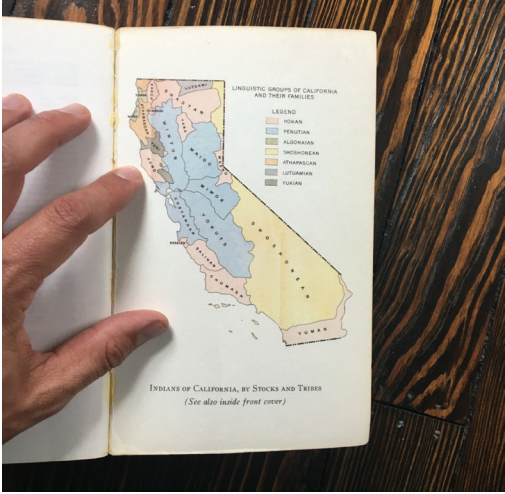
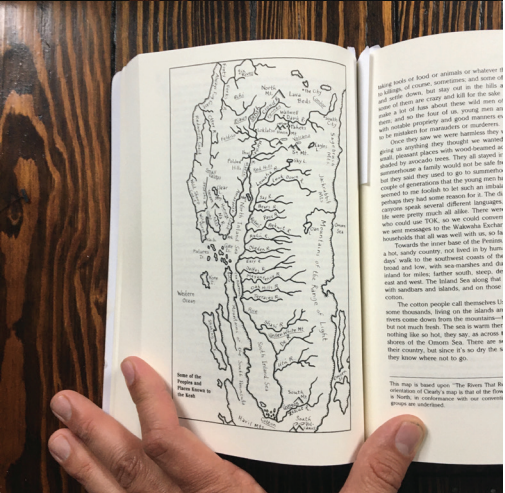
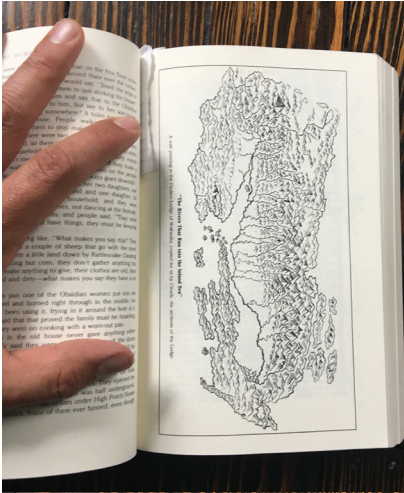
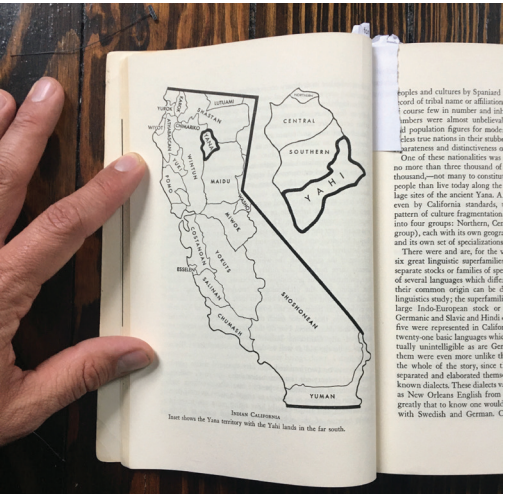
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“The Rivers that Run to the Inland Sea” by Ursula K. Le Guin, in Ursula K. Le Guin, *Always Coming Home* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001) , 125.

“Indians of California, by Stocks and Tribes” in A. L. Kroeber, *Handbook of the Indians of California* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1976) , inside cover.

V.

Alfred’s work traced the edge of disaster, too. Years before he bought the house, he began coordinating an ambitious campaign of “salvage ethnography” up and down the state. He engaged with Indigenous informants to capture languages and ways of life that had survived the nineteenth century’s staggering colonial genocides but were, it was assumed, nonetheless fading into history under the pressure of White settler modernity. California Indians traditionally used fire to cultivate sustainable landscapes, and the explosive nature of the twenty-first century’s multiplying conflagrations testifies to the violent suppression of Indigenous land stewardship, as much as to reckless development or climate change. A hundred years after he conducted his seminal fieldwork, I am visiting the same places he did. His ethnographies map the burn zones, because both map Native land.



From top to bottom,
right to left:

Logan Kroeber.

David Bernbaum,
Logan Kroeber, and
Jonathan Roche.

Artist Caitlin Berrigan.

VI.

I have been grateful to be accompanied by friends, in the burn zones and at the house. As uninvited observers, we have tried to tread lightly in spaces of trauma and transformation, even as we immerse ourselves in them. I think of certain moments—with Caitlin in Coffey Park, with Allison and Maura in Fountaingrove, with Logan on the ridge above Deer Creek—but I am not inclined to try to translate that work into writing (not yet). The task closest at hand, as the project sheds the cautious distance of exploratory voyeurism and emerges from the insulated spaces afforded by White intimates, is to weave the first person into still wider patterns. Like so many narratives of entanglement, this story will need more threads if it is going to be worth the trouble of telling—if it is not going to reinforce the very histories and forces it expresses a desire to face. It is, for now, a formulary for a process of invitation, for a sequence of approaches.

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Gavin Kroeber's hand holding a hearing trumpet from Allison Smith's *Ritual Instruments for Addressing 400 Years of Trouble* (*Harms Done Harm None*) series, in the Fountaingrove neighborhood of Santa Rosa, in the Tubbs Fire burn zone.

Writer Maura Pellettieri and artist Allison Smith.



Once you have learned to do your dreaming wide awake, to balance your sanity not on the razor's edge of reason but on the double support, the fine balance, of reason and dream; once you have learned that, you cannot unlearn it any more than you can unlearn to think.