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OPINION / OP-EDS

Native student organizations want to un-name Kroeber Hall, are frustrated with faculty pushback



— Ataya Cesspooch, Alyssa Kewenvoyouma, Paloma Sanchez and Valentin Sierra, members of campus student organizations AIGSA and NALSA

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ATAYA CESSPOOCH, ALYSSA KEWENVOYOUMA, PALOMA SANCHEZ and VALENTIN SIERRA | STAFF AUGUST 25, 2023

We are Native students currently enrolled in various programs at UC Berkeley: the School of Law; the School of Social Welfare; the College of Letters and Science; the environmental science, policy and management department; the engineering department and other disciplines. Together, we welcome the Native American Advisory Council's proposal to un-name Kroeber Hall as an opportunity for UC Berkeley to take concrete steps toward healing its relationship with California Tribal communities and fostering a more welcoming environment for Native students.

We were disappointed by the pushback against this opportunity, however, particularly given the history of UC Berkeley and its anthropology department. The violence perpetrated against the Indigenous peoples of what is today California should not be discounted or minimized by UC Berkeley faculty members in order to preserve the fictionalized benevolence of their disciplines. These defenses fit into a long-standing culture on campus that normalizes white fragility and pressures students, staff and faculty who are Black, Indigenous or people of color to remain silent about institutionalized racism and their own experiences. Whether or not current professors acknowledge our concerns, UC Berkeley harmed Indigenous communities before, during and after Alfred Kroeber's tenure. This history continues to weigh heavily on California Natives and current Indigenous students, staff and faculty.

When we think of Ishi, we think of ourselves. We think about our grandparents and the ancestors we lost to genocide. We are reminded that institutions such as UC Berkeley were not made for us or our ancestors. We consistently have to present ourselves in white spaces to succeed and survive, not only for ourselves but for our communities that continue to be adversely impacted.

The story of Ishi may seem complex, but for us, it is all too familiar. Some of our colleagues have chosen to evade the inherently racist treatment of Ishi as an object of study in their responses to the un-naming proposal. We view this as a perpetuation of Kroeber's legacy of harm against Indigenous people.

It is important to acknowledge the racist ideologies that ultimately justified the ways in which Ishi was treated during and after his life and the ways that these ideologies are manifested today. As Native students, this logic is harmful and further perpetuates colonial violence against contemporary Indigenous communities.

When deciding to pursue higher education, many of us were wary of choosing UC Berkeley because of its particularly controversial history and current practices regarding Indigenous people. Some of us chose to enroll here specifically to address the harms perpetrated by Kroeber and UC Berkeley. Others chose to enroll here despite UC Berkeley's history, knowing we would need to engage in this work and our colleagues' white fragility surrounding it.

As a land-grant institution, UC Berkeley was built from the sale of more than 150,000 acres of Miwok, Yokuts, Gabrieleño, Maidu and Pomo lands, among many others, which were expropriated and granted to the state of California through the Morrill Act. Income from the sale of these lands constituted as much as a third of the school's annual operating expenses in the late 19th century.

Thus, UC Berkeley's academic prestige — including that of its anthropology department — was achieved largely through Indigenous land theft, genocide and other violent colonial practices. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge how the UC Berkeley anthropology department specifically grew to fame by stealing ancestral remains, a practice normalized by Kroeber.

Because of this history, UC Berkeley's administration, students, faculty and the anthropology department, in particular, continue to benefit from stolen land and the genocide of Indigenous peoples. UC Berkeley's lack of progress on the repatriation process demonstrates that this is not a distant legacy, but an entrenched and continuous reality. Native students at UC Berkeley have long voiced these concerns. The proposal to un-name Kroeber Hall and cleanse campus of celebratory reminders of this past is not "woefully misinformed and in the pop style of social media "cancel culture," as campus anthropology professor Nancy Scheper-Hughes wrote in a blog post, but is consistent with a long legacy of Native advocacy.

In November 2019, during Native American Heritage Month, Oscar Dubon, vice chancellor for equity and inclusion, wrote in a campuswide email, "It is also a time to acknowledge the university's fraught relationship with Native communities and to celebrate the work being done to heal that relationship and better support members of Native groups on campus." UC Berkeley further aims not only to increase "overall diversity and access to a Berkeley education," but also to "create a campus where all Berkeley students, faculty, and staff feel respected, supported, and valued."

As Native students, we view the un-naming proposal as a way for UC Berkeley to fulfill these promises to support us and future Native students on campus. We ask that UC Berkeley stand by this statement and un-name Kroeber Hall.

Un-naming should not be mistaken as an erasure of history, nor as an attack on the anthropology department as a whole. Instead, it should be seen as an actionable step toward the commitment this institution has made to its Native American students, the Tribal communities it serves and the Ohlone communities whose land we currently occupy and continue to benefit from — these Ohlone communities include, but are not limited to, the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe of the San Francisco Bay Area and the Confederated Villages of Lisjan.

Some have suggested the building be renamed Ishi Hall to honor local Tribes. We believe that UC Berkeley should respect the sovereignty of local Tribes and consult with them to find a new name. It is not appropriate to speak on behalf of all "California Natives" or assume naming the building "Ishi Hall" will honor them. This information can only be gleaned through meaningful consultation with these Tribes, an act we highly encourage the relevant committee to pursue.

This proposal is only a step toward reconciliation, and there still remains much work to be done to repair UC Berkeley's fraught relationships with Native peoples. We encourage the school to continue this work to truly make this campus a more just and equitable place for all BIPOC.

Ataya Cesspooch, Alyssa Kewenvoyouma, Paloma Sanchez and Valentin Sierra are members of the American Indian Graduate Student Association (AIGSA), the Native American Law Student Association (NALSA) and the Indigenous and Native Coalition Recruitment and Retention Center at UC Berkeley.

LAST UPDATED AUGUST 25, 2023

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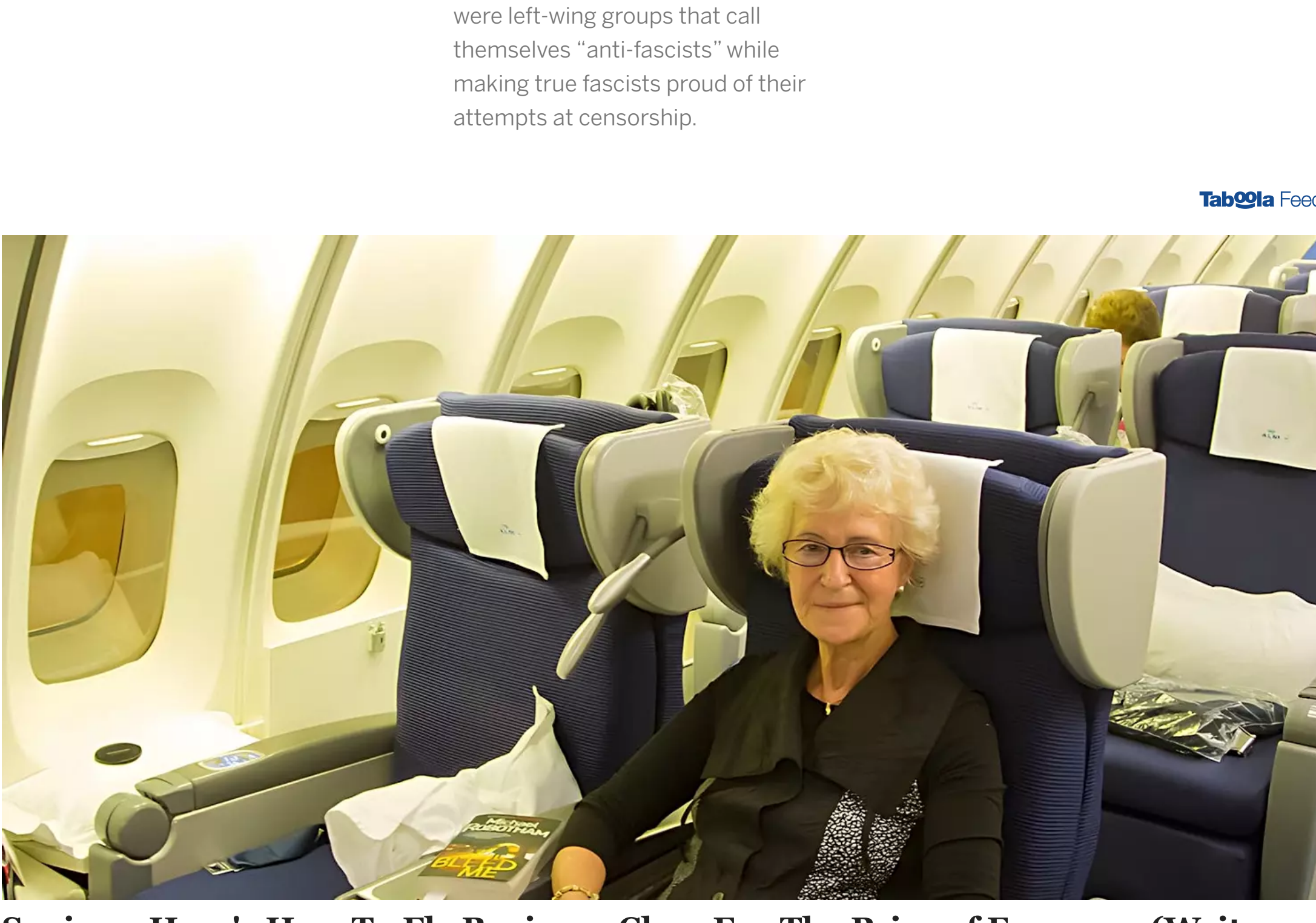
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On one side were conservative demonstrators — led by Trump supporter Amber Cummings — who believe that they were participating in a righteous crusade to rid UC Berkeley of its leftist hegemony. On the other side were left-wing groups that call themselves "anti-fascists" while making true fascists proud of their attempts at censorship.

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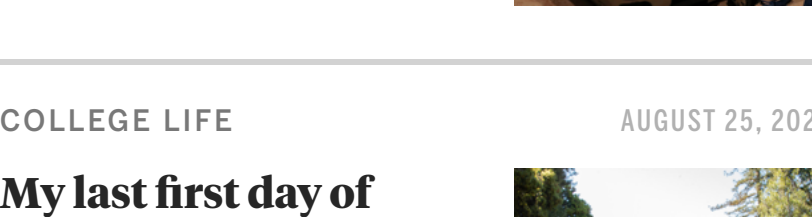
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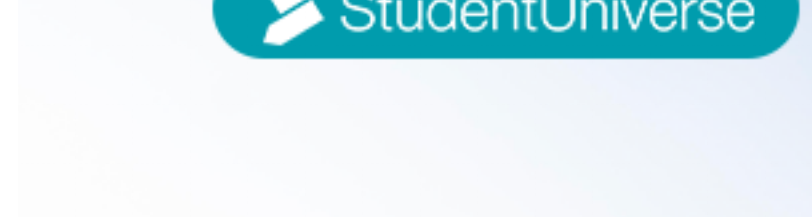
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