

# Indigeneity

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OVER the last five years, Victorian studies has received several calls to address our field's entanglements with the structures of racism, settler colonialism, and white supremacy.<sup>1</sup> In the wake of those interventions, discussions about “decolonizing” research and teaching have prompted important reflections on how Victorianists can acknowledge, learn from, and cite other fields already undertaking these efforts. As two settler scholars building robust connections with critical Indigenous studies in our work, we are mindful of the risks and responsibilities that attend these engagements. As we seek to redress the devastation of settler colonialism and reckon with our complicities with it, we understand the importance of building a scholarly ethic that does not simply study “Indigeneity” as an abstract concept or set of representations from the past but demands sustained and reciprocal relations with living Indigenous communities, both within and outside the academy.

Of course, building these relationships requires a rigorous process of self-examination and reckoning with one's own positionality through asking frank questions about our relations and investments.<sup>2</sup> Where are you located in terms of place, nation, ethnicity, and culture? Whose land was stolen to build your university, and whose bones and cultural treasures are in your school's grounds and libraries? Furthermore, what motivates your interest in Indigenous cultures or people, and how do you interact with Indigenous people, if at all? What are the material and action-based requests from Indigenous nations and Native-led organizations in your community, and how much time and resources are you willing to sacrifice to support these efforts? Interrogating our answers to these questions is necessary to avoid the trap of what Eve Tuck (Unanga<sup>x</sup>) and K. Wayne Yang call “settler moves to innocence” and

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to instead engage in what we are calling “moves to commitment,” which inherently require intellectual effort, material support, and moving through discomfort.<sup>3</sup>

At a minimum, engaging Indigeneity from within Victorian studies must include learning from, citing, and centering the scholarly work and community-generated knowledge of Indigenous academics, elders, and activists—both within the Victorian era and our own. As Jennifer Denetdale (Diné) has argued, critical Indigenous studies offers insights for every field within the academy.<sup>4</sup> From scholars like Aileen Moreton Robinson (Goenpul), we can better understand Indigeneity as a complex political category linked to land and sovereignty, and as a relational identity of both kinship responsibilities and blood.<sup>5</sup> Too often in Victorian studies, we flatten Britain’s “others” and accept colonial language and perceived dominance, causing us to potentially romanticize Native identity by falling for the seductive stereotype of the “noble savage” or to reproduce the logic of racial (and racist) categorization systems like blood quantum.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, by learning about the specificities of tribal knowledge and intertribal relations—which are sometimes contentious—we can better attend to the localized enactments of what Gerald Vizenor (White Earth Ojibwe) terms Indigenous “survivance” and what Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg) terms “resurgence.”<sup>7</sup> By presenting Indigenous knowledges in their own terms, we honor how specific tribes and nations responded to losses of land and sovereignty across diverse contexts throughout and beyond the nineteenth century, including within the literary space. As Mishuana Goeman (Tonawanda Band of Seneca) has argued, Indigenous people were mobile, modern, diverse, and highly adaptive in subverting recognition or “accurate” mapping by the modern state.<sup>8</sup> Acknowledging these strategies helps decenter and deconstruct the colonial and imperial forms of knowing that undergird our field, including what Brendan Hokowhitu (Ngāti Pūkenga) calls the “shallowness of its claims,” as we work in solidarity to build “knowledge beyond the ramparts of colonial taxonomies.”<sup>9</sup>

But solidarity also demands that we look beyond the archive and university. Our work as Victorianists must consider how we still grapple with the material legacies of racial capitalism, genocide under settler colonialism, and colonial extractivism. As scholars of the nineteenth century, our knowledge of the devastating impacts of these epistemologies and practices equips us to make common cause with ongoing Indigenous efforts to contest oil pipelines, rising fascism and white supremacy, and the sponsorship of Indigenous genocide in nations such

as Palestine, India, and Yemen. Critically, here, too, is the importance of also forging local connections with Indigenous communities fighting for their sovereign rights to land and self-determination. The work is slow and complicated by logistical and ethical challenges, but if we are to study Indigeneity in ways that are at all responsible, we need to listen to, and actually hear, what Indigenous communities are saying, both archivally and currently. Otherwise, we are objectifying Indigenous people's historical and ongoing struggles for our own curiosity, careerism, and saviorist desires—desires that are not only unhelpful but materially violent.

With that in mind, how will you recognize the contribution of Indigenous scholars and historical figures to Victorian studies? And, more importantly, what action will you take today to connect with living Indigenous people as you reckon with the consequences of Victorian-era ideas, laws, and literature for these contemporary communities?

#### NOTES

1. Ronjaunee Chatterjee, Alicia Mireles Christoff, and Amy R. Wong, "Introduction: Undisciplining Victorian Studies," *Victorian Studies* 62, no. 3 (2020): 369–91.
2. To follow our own call: Emma B. Mincks identifies as a mixed-heritage settler scholar and community organizer from Rapid City, South Dakota in He Sapa. Their family (Bill Groethe) has multigenerational relationships with Lakota people, primarily the Oglala Sioux Tribe, the Rosebud Sioux Tribe, and the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe. Emma has been heavily influenced by Lakota epistemologies, relationality, and organizing work with Lakota and Northern Irish environmental activists. Ryan D. Fong is a mixed-race Asian American settler scholar descended from Toisanese immigrants and Dutch and German settlers. They grew up on Nisenan lands in California and currently live on the reserve lands of the Match-E-Be-Nash-She-Wish Band of Pottawatomis taken in the Treaty of 1827. Ryan is engaged in ongoing projects to build ethical relationships between Kalamazoo College and local Anishinaabe nations. These relationships do not grant us Indigenous identities or authoritative claims to Indigenous culture. Instead, our positions offer distinct lenses to interrogate race, ethnicity, and land while undertaking our scholarly and political work.

3. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 9.
4. Jennifer Nez Denetdale, “Critical Indigenous Studies: A Lifetime of Theory and Practice,” *Journal of Arizona History* 61, nos. 3–4 (2020): 622–23.
5. Aileen Moreton-Robinson, “Introduction: Locations of Engagement in the First World,” in *Critical Indigenous Studies: Engagements in First World Locations* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2016), 6–8.
6. For more on “blood,” race, and settler-colonial attacks on Indigenous sovereignty, see Joanne Barker, *Red Scare: The State’s Indigenous Terrorist* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021); and Kim Tallbear, *Native American DNA: Tribal Belonging and the False Promise of Genetic Science* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013). Tallbear is Sisseton-Wahpeton, and Barker is Lenape.
7. Simpson and Vizenor write about these concepts across many of their works. For examples, see Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence, and a New Emergence* (Chico: AK Press, 2011); and Gerald Robert Vizenor, ed., *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008).
8. Mishuana Goeman, *Mark My Words: Native Women Mapping Our Nations* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 3–5.
9. Brendan Hokowhitu, “Monster: Post-Indigenous Studies,” in *Critical Indigenous Studies*, edited by Aileen Moreton-Robinson, 95 (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2016).

