

MUSING

# Decolonizing Allyship and Settler Support for Indigenous Climate Justice: A Note of Thanks to Andrea Sullivan-Clarke

Andrew Frederick Smith

Department of English and Philosophy, Drexel University, Philadelphia, PA 19104  
Corresponding author. Email: [afs52@drexel.edu](mailto:afs52@drexel.edu)

(Received 13 December 2020; revised 2 September 2021; accepted 7 September 2021)

## Abstract

I've been thinking quite a lot of late about how, as a settler, I can more fully and effectively support Indigenous peoples struggling for climate justice. In the process, I've found Andrea Sullivan-Clarke's recent insights about decolonizing allyship most helpful. After offering a brief summary of the necessary and sufficient conditions Sullivan-Clarke identifies for decolonizing allyship, I reflect on how I personally can strive to meet these conditions while remaining aware that—like my recovery from alcoholism—my work will never be complete.

In the wake of George Floyd's murder, a friend from my youth posted a comment on social media that I haven't been able to get out of my mind:

Many years ago, I was riding a bus in Dublin when a man stepped off the curb and was hit by the bus. I saw him just before it happened, and I felt the slightest little bump as he bounced off the front of the bus. I do not know what happened to him; he might have survived, but he was at least badly injured. That little bump that I felt has haunted me, because I know enough physics to know that that feeling was my own little bit of personal momentum being transferred into his body. When combined with the momentum of the bus, and everybody else on board, it was enough to kill him.

If you don't see where I'm going with this, keep in mind (even though I often fail to keep it in mind) that I'm a white, middle-aged, hetero, (formerly) Christian American man. This racist system that we have built is carried along by my personal momentum. Every black or brown or gay or trans or female body that gets run over by this system is damaged by my little contribution to that momentum.

I'd like to get off this bus now.

More so, I'd like to help render the bus inoperable, to dismantle it. But how? That's the initial question that came to my mind when I first read these lines. And it's not a particularly good question to begin with. Because I haven't come close to fully

metabolizing just how much the successes I've experienced are attributable to systemic colonialism, racism, and heteropatriarchy and how this affects my capacity to serve as an ally.

"Whiteness is a metaphor for power," states James Baldwin (cited in Peck 2016). In settler colonial culture, so is being a cishet male (Smith 2005, 311; Bishop 2015, 17).<sup>1</sup> I may be hell-bent on resisting systems of domination. But this changes not one whit that I'm a walking embodiment of them, which means I also need to resist the ways in which I conveniently overlook my privilege.

It's with this in mind that I offer a note of thanks to Andrea Sullivan-Clarke. Not long after seeing my friend's post I happened to read "Decolonizing 'Allyship' for Indian Country: Lessons from #NODAPL" (Sullivan-Clarke 2020a) in *Hypatia*. Sullivan-Clarke's timely article has given me a conceptual framework for developing a clearer sense of how I can serve as an ally, particularly in support of the pursuit of Indigenous climate justice. Permit me to offer a brief sketch of her position before (i) adding a humble addendum of my own and (ii) outlining how certain of my experiences as a recovering alcoholic have proven surprisingly beneficial as I consider how to pursue allyship on Sullivan-Clarke's terms.

### Addressing Injustices Old and New

Assessing how non-Native persons like me should offer support for Indigenous peoples is a pressing concern, Sullivan-Clarke asserts, for "threats to sovereignty and personal safety are part and parcel of what Indigenous people face today" (Sullivan-Clarke 2020a, 178). How the non-Native majority in nations like the United States and Canada responds is critical to the success of Indigenous anticolonial resistance movements, hence to addressing a list of injustices and abuses that includes and extends beyond the climatological and ecological threat embodied by the Dakota Access Pipeline. As Sullivan-Clarke notes, Indigenous communities routinely face extreme poverty, rampant substance abuse, epidemics of sexual violence, disproportionately high incarceration rates compared to white settler populations, and chronically poor health. "Other pernicious threats—such as revoking tribal recognition, contesting foster-care placement laws, proposed reductions in treaty obligations, the failure to pursue cases of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, and the taking of Indigenous land—loom daily," she notes, "profoundly affecting the lives of Indigenous people in North America" (Sullivan-Clarke 2020c, 31). Add, states Kyle Whyte, "assimilative institutions (e.g., boarding schools) to containment practices (e.g., reservations) to the creation of dependency (e.g., commodity foods)" (Whyte 2017, 208), and it's no wonder he concludes that his Potawatomi ancestors' dystopia exists now.

Whyte's remark highlights too that the centuries-long history of settler interactions with Indigenous communities in North America abounds with self-professed "allies behaving badly," as Rachel McKinnon puts it (McKinnon 2017). McKinnon's main concern is with those who claim allyship with members of the trans\* community yet who nevertheless exhibit a propensity to commit epistemic injustices against trans\* persons. Most notably, this includes purported allies doubting the credibility of trans\* persons' testimony about their experiences and then appealing to their identity as allies to deflect criticisms they receive from those whom they discredit.<sup>2</sup>

McKinnon hereby rejects the suitability of allyship within this context and instead advocates that individuals who wish to support the trans\* community serve as

*active bystanders*. Active bystanders respond pro-socially to prevent or address bias, prejudice, and threats of violence against those whom they support (Sullivan-Clarke 2020a, 187, n. 3). They needn't have any familiarity with the culture, history, or prototypical experiences of those on whose behalf they intervene, and they claim no further identity related to these actions.

Active bystanders can play a salient role in supporting Indigenous communities as well, Sullivan-Clarke contends. Yet in the face of systemic oppression of Indigenous peoples, she's unwilling to jettison allyship—so long as the concept is “subject to decolonizing treatment” (178). The needs of Indian country require *both* more expansive and sustained forms of support by sympathetic settlers than active bystandership permits *and* that the forms this support takes be stipulated and directed by Indigenous peoples themselves.

### Decolonizing—and Indigenizing—Allyship

Sullivan-Clarke mentions in a companion piece to her *Hypatia* article that she's intent not only to decolonize allyship but also to indigenize it (Sullivan-Clarke 2020b). The concept of allyship must be made suitable for the specific needs and interests of Indigenous peoples. It must bear the mark of Indigenous authorship.

First and foremost, Sullivan-Clarke emphasizes, allyship must be understood not as an identity but instead as a *relational designation*. In yet another companion piece, she offers a provisional list of necessary and sufficient conditions for the specifiable relationship embodied by allyship with Indigenous peoples (Sullivan-Clarke 2020c, 39). Allies (i) affirm the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples, (ii) acknowledge their privilege, including its colonial antecedents, and (iii) serve the avowed needs and interests of those whom they support.

*Affirming sovereignty* involves promoting the well-being of the specific people one is committed to serving (Sullivan-Clarke 2020b, 4). This requires engaging with said people as epistemic equals: respecting and deferring to their testimony regarding firsthand experiences and practicing humility, particularly when welcomed to engage in planning sessions or attend ceremonies. Allies also must respect the right of Indigenous communities to decline requests for involvement, especially given “that a long history of colonization, which often included violence, has contributed to a lack of trust” (Sullivan-Clarke 2020c, 38).<sup>3</sup> Again, allyship is relational. To become and remain an ally is an ongoing process that requires mutual consent (39). It involves a sustained, renewable commitment to resist the structures and systems that perpetuate settler colonialism (Sullivan-Clarke 2020a, 181).

Within a decolonizing context, affirming sovereignty also involves supporting Indigenous land rematriation, reparations, and the expansion of Indigenous jurisdiction. Each is critical to dismantling colonial matrices of power and the institutions that perpetuate it, particularly in the context of resisting climate injustice.<sup>4</sup> “Through hard practice—and in the face of centuries of legal, political, and physical struggle—Indian communities have become adept at the art of governance,” states David Treuer. “And tribes have a hard-earned understanding of the ways in which land empowers the people it sustains” (Treuer 2021). These practices and forms of understanding offer settlers, too, perhaps our only opportunity to escape the worst effects of a sixth mass extinction that's already unfolding (Bendik-Keymer 2020).

*Acknowledging privilege* requires of settlers that we cultivate self-awareness. Most notably, as Whyte highlights, we must come to grips with the fact that our very

being as settlers on North American soil is the result of territorial dispossession and genocide of Indigenous peoples (Whyte 2018b). We may think of socioecological collapse as impending. But Whyte makes clear that this phenomenon is neither new nor unprecedented. His ancestors can attest to this (Whyte 2020a; see also Callison 2014). So can Sullivan-Clarke's Muskogee progenitors. Moreover, Whyte stresses that settler culture has long since passed key *relational tipping points* with respect to our treatment of the land, more-than-human living community, and Indigenous peoples (Whyte 2020b). Reckoning with harms past and present with open eyes and frankly acknowledging the need for relational repair—of which Indigenous climate justice is a key component—is critical.

Do I somehow relinquish my privilege by taking the individual initiative to engage in decolonizing work, as Kendrick Brown and Joan Ostrove (Brown and Ostrove 2013) suggest?<sup>5</sup> I'm afraid not. I may want to witness the demise of privilege, including my own. But it's a dangerous mistake to think that this can be accomplished without myriad social and cultural institutions being dismantled (Smith 2013). I can no more voluntarily opt out of my privilege, as Brown and Ostrove insinuate, than those without it can voluntarily opt in (Sealey 2018).

"Understanding this is part of learning to think structurally rather than individually," Anne Bishop contends. "It is part of avoiding overpersonalization of the issue" (Bishop 2015, 95; see also D'Arcangelis 2018). It's a matter not just of being attentive to my social and cultural positionality but of being aware that the best of intentions among settlers like me pale in comparison to "the structures, processes, values, greed, and actions of the settler colonial state, its industrial capitalist economic imperatives and its well-indoctrinated citizens," as Lynne Davis and her colleagues remark (Davis et al. 2017, 398–99). Indeed, I would be foolish to conclude that I'm not one of these citizens. Shaped as I've been by these self-same structures, of course I am (Smith 2013, 264). This is precisely why I value regarding allyship in relational terms—as a sustained collective enterprise that I'm part of in concert with those I seek to serve—rather than as reflective of my identity.

*Striving to serve* demands that allies take their cues regarding how to uphold their responsibilities to Indigenous communities from the members of these communities. There are over 1,200 federally recognized Indigenous communities in the United States and Canada, Sullivan-Clarke notes. They may share cultural similarities, just as they may face common problems associated with colonization. But interests and perspectives among Indigenous communities also may conflict (Sullivan-Clarke 2020c, 34). So please don't speak for Indigenous peoples, Sullivan-Clarke implores. Be willing humbly to acknowledge ignorance of the full breadth and depth of their intergenerational traumas; to investigate how one's positionality supports one's ignorance<sup>6</sup>; to learn about the history, culture, and land relation of those with whom one seeks to engage without burdening or exploiting them (Davis et al. 2017, 407)<sup>7</sup>; to take a back seat and listen (Gehl n.d.); and to "respect the wishes and goals of Indigenous people qua people, and not as a romantic ideal that prevents critical discourse" (Sullivan-Clarke 2020a, 186).

### A Settler's Addendum

Like all couples, my partner Sherrilyn and I occasionally argue. Our arguments sometimes occur because I unintentionally say hurtful things. One thing I've had to learn during our years together is that reconciling with Sherrilyn doesn't involve taking

responsibility only for what I intend to convey. It also requires taking responsibility for how what I convey is received. Being part of a loving relationship necessitates that I be cognizant of how our respective baggage colors the way we react to certain words and actions. I may not mean to be hurtful, which matters. But being hurtful matters, too.

Admittedly, my learning has been painfully slow. I suppose this is due in part to some combination of residual stubbornness and the benighted idea that I gain something by “winning” arguments, both of which are probably vestiges of my patriarchal upbringing. But I accept that taking responsibility both for my intentions and for how what I say and do is received is part of what’s entailed in being committed to Sherrilyn—and to the practice of commitment itself.

The same general dynamic applies, I think, with respect to my pursuit of allyship with Indigenous peoples. This pursuit can’t be a matter of papering over the crimes of my ancestors or somehow proving my own innocence with respect to colonization (Tuck and Yang 2012). To the contrary, making myself aware of past and present injustices perpetrated by settlers against Indigenous peoples confers upon me a responsibility to do what I can to reckon with and rectify my own ancestors’ probable actions.<sup>8</sup> Moral repair is in order, and we do well to understand this too in relational terms.

Vine Deloria contends that every action is actually an interaction; we’re rooted in relationships all the way down (Deloria 1999, 46f.). This being so, Brian Burkhart states, it’s entirely fitting to describe the universe itself as moral in character (Burkhart 2004; see also Pratt 2006, 7). We humans have our responsibilities. Others of the living community do as well. So do ancestors, places, stellar bodies, physical forces, and the cardinal directions (Norton-Smith 2010, 93).

Consider the critical role Anishinaabe women have played as water protectors in resisting ways that settler practices defame and degrade waterways. This includes the Dakota Access Pipeline. These women’s actions aren’t just a reflection of their own responsibilities to the water but a sign of recognition that the water isn’t inert. It’s a key member of the Anishinaabe people, a vital supporter of life with its own responsibilities to fulfill. To defame and degrade it is not only to shirk our responsibilities but to interfere with the water’s duties to the Anishinaabe and, as part of a wider global system of waterways, to the rest of earthly creation (McGregor 2009, 37f.; see also Whyte 2014; Kearns 2017).

As a settler, to engage in moral repair is to endeavor to make oneself fit to be welcomed by members of Indigenous communities on their terms (Darnell 1999, 91).<sup>9</sup> Affirming the sovereignty of these communities demands as much. So does basic decency. I’m struck, for example, by Sullivan-Clarke’s remark about members of Veterans Stand for Standing Rock (VSSR) taking part in ceremonies and rituals with #NODAPL water protectors (Sullivan-Clarke 2020a, 182). This, she states, is a sign of allyship, which makes good sense. Still, I hesitate to consider this a lesson that applies to me.

Prayer and song, ceremony and ritual are part of the traditions of Indigenous peoples the world over. Traditions in turn are the progressive accumulation of experiences and adaptive responses to changes both within Indigenous communities and wider social, political, economic, and ecological dynamics (Reo and Whyte 2012, 15). They’re designed and reworked expressly to facilitate ongoing trust, empathy, consent, and respect among a people in good times and bad (Whyte 2018c, 12ff.). Traditions are thus part of an integrated, holistic approach to seeking to uphold, sustain, and vitalize community relations. They comprise the “multigenerational spatial knowledge” (Wildcat 2009, 16) that helps to make a people good neighbors to other peoples (both human and other-than-human) season after season.

This is a form of knowledge I don't have. I won't ever have it no matter how much I may want things to be otherwise. So when I think of Sullivan-Clarke's remark about VSSR, I can't help but acknowledge that there also are forms of Indigenous performance that aren't for me (Whyte, Caldwell, and Schaefer, 2018), particularly if I'm not (yet) fit to be welcomed. But it goes beyond this. It means embracing that Indigenous peoples must be able to enjoy the individual and collective agency required to uphold extended more-than-human kin relationships that I don't share.<sup>10</sup>

Recognizing this as I strive to serve doesn't permit me to claim allyship, though. Allyship is not something that can be claimed, at least not by someone in my position. To assume that I can claim it strikes me as yet another expression of privilege. For doing so would involve bestowing on myself a badge of distinction simply for choosing to live up to my inborn responsibilities. As Ernest Owens says with respect more generally to white allyship with persons of color (Owens 2020), I don't get to play both the hero and villain in others' trauma.

Offering reasons to trust, exhibiting empathy, seeking consent, and paying respect are within my purview. Their reciprocation isn't. And I'm not owed anything, no matter how well I comport myself. Whyte notes that his ancestors likely would warn him about would-be allies like me (Whyte 2017, 232). They encountered no shortage of white "friends of the Indian" who nevertheless sought to dismantle Indigenous kinship systems and liquidate Indigenous territories supposedly for the betterment of the Potawatomi themselves. Leanne Simpson notes in turn that because whiteness is centered on domination, "there is virtually no room for white people in resurgence" (Simpson 2017, 228). Indigenous peoples must refuse to center whiteness in seeking out allies. Instead, as Sullivan-Clarke describes with respect to the relationship forged between water protectors at Standing Rock and members of Black Lives Matter, Indigenous peoples should build constellations of co-resistance with marginalized communities who are already part of the struggle in their own ways. Perhaps, Simpson adds, "our real white allies show up in solidarity anyway" (228).

Owens also notes that until systemic racism and colonialism are eradicated, whatever allyship I and those like me may wish to deserve is always incomplete. Comparably, no matter how much he defends and promotes gender equality:

My male privilege will remain intact until the rest of society grants women their full rights and protections. I cannot deny the reality of a society that continues to treat others as lesser than cisgender men, nor can I deny that I still benefit from this injustice. All I can do is focus on all the ways I can dismantle these sexist paradigms within my own life without praise, visibility, or being asked to. (Owens 2020)

Accept a lifetime of responsibility. No, accept *more* than a lifetime of responsibility, with due reflection on the centuries of lost and damaged lives for which the people of my culture—including my own ancestors—are to blame. "Just do the work because it's the right thing to do," Owens concludes, "and understand that it will never be enough."

### Recovering Responsibility

I also must thank Sullivan-Clarke for motivating me to read more widely about allyship. In the process, I came across a line in Anne Bishop's *Becoming an Ally* that shook me to

my core. “A white person never becomes nonracist but is always a ‘recovering racist,’” she insists (Bishop 2015, 94; see also Sullivan-Clarke 2020a, 185). This certainly resonates with Owens’s considerations. But conceptualizing allyship in terms of recovery is emotionally laden for me. Because I’ve been sober now for ten years.

I started drinking in my mid-teens and regularly binged over the next couple decades. After a devastating experience centered on my professional life, I began hitting the bottle really hard. For five years, I downed nearly a fifth of bourbon a day.

I suppose I counted as a functional alcoholic, although the term is really a misnomer. I got drunk, really drunk, almost every night. But with a couple pots of coffee each morning I was able to make it through the next day before coming home and doing the whole thing over again. I taught my classes, managed to write a book and several articles, somehow landed a tenure-track job, and otherwise got done what I needed to get done. Yet I lived in a perpetual fog, hung over during the day and pretty much inert at night—with “night” coming earlier and earlier as the years progressed.

In time, though, I began to notice that drinking didn’t offer the escape it once had. In common parlance, my tolerance for the drink increased. Something else was going on, too. I was becoming aware that genuine relief remained perpetually just beyond my reach. It was always one more drink away. Along with beginning to experience the breakdown of my blood platelets, this awareness turned out to be a key factor for getting me into rehab.

Particularly in the United States, we tend to view addiction in two competing ways, neither of which is particularly helpful. Organizations like Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) support the widespread belief that addiction results from abiding moral defects.<sup>11</sup> The medical community views addiction primarily through a pharmacological lens, as the routine abuse of dangerous substances that, over time, create and strengthen reliance. Both parties, though, depict addiction as irrational. No one of sound mind willfully chooses to become an addict. One becomes an addict because one’s mind becomes warped. Or, in more clinical terms, destructive habits reinforce adverse modifications to one’s neurobiology.

Yet I’ve come to think of my alcoholism instead as a manifestation of what I can only call a *rational dysfunction*. It’s a horrible practice that nevertheless makes sense to engage in, given one’s prevailing options. No, I didn’t set out to become a drunk. But why I abused alcohol certainly makes sense to me, and it’s reducible neither to moral deficiency nor to pharmacology.<sup>12</sup>

What exactly was I trying to escape by drinking myself into oblivion? My demons past, present, and (presumably) future, for sure. There was something else, too, something far uglier. Like all settlers, I’m captive of a culture that compels me to be complicit in myriad destructive practices. This isn’t our path of least resistance. *There’s no other path within our cultural confines*. In order to get by, we’re compelled to engage in behaviors that are profoundly damaging—to the planet, to others, and to ourselves. This too is a rational dysfunction.

In a culture that only compounds our demons with the inability to escape being both damaging and damaged, even self-destructive relief had erstwhile advantages. Comedian Russell Brand states in jest that “Drugs and alcohol are not my problem. Reality is my problem. Drugs and alcohol are my solution” (Brand 2013). They’re a terrible solution, yes, but for an even more terrible reality.

Among the most salient solutions I’ve found to coping with my addiction is actually to *resist* AA. Why I’ve done so corresponds to Sullivan-Clarke’s conceptualization of allyship. To be clear, I’m not saying that AA serves no one. I’m saying it doesn’t

serve me. Part of the reason for this is that it strongly encourages both experiencing and expressing guilt for one's condition, which is an unfit response to a rational dysfunction.

Among white allies (or those who purport to be allies), expressions of guilt are often meant to elicit responses from the oppressed that restore our comfort rather than support decolonizing work (Barker 2010, 321). Wittingly or not, such expressions reflect a sense of entitlement to comfort. They functionally serve as *abdications* of responsibility.<sup>13</sup> To use Sullivan-Clarke's terminology, they lead (purported) white allies to fail to stand in proper relation with respect to the Indigenous peoples they claim to serve (Sullivan-Clarke 2020b, 36).

Indeed, the struggle for Indigenous climate justice isn't a "Native problem." It's "a non-Native problem, both in its initial construction and its perpetuation," as Tom Keefer states (Keefer 2010, 78). It's being led and directed by Indigenous peoples, as is fitting. But I need to step up. Given anti-Indigenous characteristics of the resurgence of white nationalism, unabated demand by transnational corporations and their enablers for access to dwindling resources, and the acceleration of global climate change, Sullivan-Clarke's call for us settlers to right our relationship with Indigenous peoples within an expressly decolonial context is timely.

Again, my actions in support of Indigenous peoples will never be enough. As with my recovery from alcoholism, my work as a recovering colonizer is never complete. Allyship isn't mine to claim, and whether or not I ever earn it is largely beside the point. I have more than a lifetime of relationships to support and responsibilities to uphold. They're what matter.

**Acknowledgments.** I'm grateful to Andrea Sullivan-Clarke for her feedback on an earlier version of this essay. Thanks as well to two anonymous referees for helpful reviews.

## Notes

1 Settler colonial culture derives from practices and institutions associated with non-Native peoples occupying and legitimizing the occupation of Indigenous lands (Tuck and Yang 2012). The goal of settler colonialism is the elimination of Indigenous populations—both culturally and physically—in order to make land and resources available to colonizers (Wolfe 2010). Indeed, settler colonialism is a form not just of social domination but also of ecological domination. Indigenous peoples are disproportionately adversely affected by global climate change and ecological devastation, and their ability to engage in practices conducive to socioecological resilience as self-determining collectives is strategically undermined (Whyte 2018b).

2 McKinnon suggests that individuals who claim allyship tend to overestimate the quality of their support (McKinnon 2017, 172). Even after going through formal training, they may systematically fail to grasp their social biases arising from privilege. This dynamic leads them to be taken aback when called out, which can trigger knee-jerk testimonial silencing.

3 Rita Dhamoon forthrightly acknowledges that she's suspicious of white men and of "cis-men active in social struggles more generally" (Snelgrove, Dhamoon, and Corntassel 2014, 7). I don't blame her. Like Kevin Fitzmaurice, I belong to a demographic that, short of being born rich, reproduces most completely colonial, racial, and heteropatriarchal structures of domination, which means that our shared positionality offers just about "the most difficult challenge to the possibility of becoming an ally to Aboriginal people" (Fitzmaurice 2010, 355).

4 Patricia Monture-Angus sets right the prototypical settler view according to which Indigenous land rematriation, reparations, and the expansion of Indigenous jurisdiction are state-mandated giveaways to the underserving. As she states, "Sovereignty, when defined as my right to be responsible . . . requires a relationship with territory (and not a relationship based on control of that territory). . . . What must be understood then is that the Aboriginal request to have our sovereignty respected is really a request to be responsible. I do not know of anywhere else in history where a group of people have to fight so hard



just to be responsible” (Monture-Angus 1999, 36). Whyte adds that insofar as there’s a parasitic relationship at work between settlers and Indigenous peoples, the direction of parasitism is precisely the opposite of the prototypical settler view (Whyte 2018a).

**5** Sullivan-Clarke takes Brown and Ostrove to task for their contention that being a member of a socially and culturally hegemonic group is a necessary condition for allyship. This erases the contributions of members of marginalized communities to Indigenous climate justice. Sullivan-Clarke adds that this stance “preserves the hierarchical assumptions of settler society” (Sullivan-Clarke 2020a, 179), including that settlers alone know “how best to act, support, and advocate for those with lower social status” (184).

**6** Bishop emphasizes that there’s a stark difference between learning about being oppressed and learning about being an oppressor. The former “has experience as a base; it is a transition from experience to consciousness through reflection.” The latter “is by definition hidden from you, because part of the process of becoming a member of an oppressor group is to be cut off from the ability to identify with the experience of the oppressed” (Bishop 2015, 92).

**7** Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang argue that academics in settler colonial contexts routinely use an implicit code to study “Indigenous, ghettoized, and Orientalized communities” (Tuck and Yang 2014, 812). This code is supported by assumptions about the capacity and right to know the Other. As a result, academics risk engaging in “inquiry as invasion,” which serves to “mask power relationships about who comes to know whom in the creation of knowledge” (811).

**8** Among the earliest of my ancestors to emigrate to the United States, one arrived in Boston at the end of the Pequot War in 1638. He moved shortly thereafter to land only recently inhabited by the Pawtucket and Massachusett, who were decimated by typhus, smallpox, measles, influenza, and diphtheria. Another was a founding claimant (in 1739) within the Borden Tract in western Virginia on land stolen from the Monacan, Saponi, and Tutelo peoples. Available evidence suggests that immediate relations of his engaged in combat with Shawnee raiders aligned with Cornstalk.

**9** As Jeff Corntassel states specifically with respect to intertribal interactions, “You only approach another Indigenous nation after you have thought it through, over and over again, and if there is willingness on the part of the host nation(s) to include or accept strangers. . . . While the land may not recognize us, the goal is to be known not as strangers but as welcome visitors with accountability to the Indigenous nations and peoples of the territory” (Snelgrove, Dhamoon and Corntassel 2014, 5). The same dynamic applies for settlers (17).

**10** Responsibility for the health and well-being of the land just is responsibility for the health and well-being of its myriad inhabitants. To be part of the land is to be enmeshed in bonds of kinship (Burkhardt 2019). This creates a set of overlapping and intersecting circles of responsibility within and across ecosystems and bioregions that are small enough to accommodate face-to-face interactions yet large enough to sustain the sovereignty and structural equality of peoples (Rose 1998).

**11** AA also encourages a mode of confession not dissimilar to a ritualistic enterprise common among white allies. Participants at AA meetings are strongly encouraged to air their deficiencies and weaknesses. On the surface, this practice has “a self-help orientation,” to use Andrea Smith’s terminology (Smith 2013, 263). It’s part of twelve-stepping. But this effectively forces participants to individualize and moralize their alcoholism rather than collectively challenging the structural underpinnings of addiction. Confessing one’s privilege and complicity in oppression creates a similar dynamic vis-à-vis structures of domination. Smith contends (263f; see also Ahmed 2006; Namaste 2015, 135). Both enterprises serve to bolster these structures by becoming what Tuck and Yang describe as “the reflexive caveat, the hand-wringing, the flash of positional confession before proceeding as usual” (Tuck and Yang 2014, 814).

**12** Candice Shelby contends that addiction is an emergent property with interrelated neurobiological, psychological, and sociological factors, often including trauma, that combine to perpetuate a deeply ingrained and damaging set of practices (Shelby 2016). So while addiction manifests in individuals, it’s partially the result of a complex set of debilitating risk environments that facilitate dependency.

**13** For me, these responsibilities include (but certainly aren’t limited to) teaching my students about traditional forms of ecological knowledge by centering the work of Indigenous authors, activists, and creators; fighting for Indigenous representation at my home institution, particularly in matters that bear on addressing climate change and ecocide; supporting ongoing efforts in eastern Pennsylvania, which I call home, for federal and state recognition of and land repatriation for the Lenape people who are indigenous to this area, in part because Indigenous peoples like the Lenape have proven considerably more adept than settler populations at facilitating biodiverse ecosystems where they enjoy a degree of tribal sovereignty (Shrestha

et al. 2008; Sobrevila 2008); and promoting the resurgence of Indigenous food systems, which is critical to supporting Indigenous kinship networks and facilitating mitigation of the worst effects of climate change.

## References

- Ahmed, Sara. 2006. Declarations of whiteness: The non-performativity of anti-racism. *Meridians* 7 (1): 104–26.
- Barker, Adam J. 2010. From adversaries to allies: Forging respectful alliances between Indigenous and settler peoples. In *Alliances*, ed. Lynne Davis. Toronto, Ont.: University of Toronto Press.
- Bendik-Keymer, Jeremy. 2020. Facing mass extinction, it is prudent to decolonise lands and laws: A philosophical essay on respecting jurisdiction. *Griffith Law Review* 29 (4): 561–84.
- Bishop, Anne. 2015. *Becoming an ally*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Halifax, N.S.: Fernwood.
- Brand, Russell. 2013. My life without drugs. *The Guardian*, March 8.
- Brown, Kendrick T., and Joan M. Ostrove. 2013. What does it mean to be an ally? The perception of allies from the perspective of people of color. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 43 (11): 2211–22.
- Burkhart, Brian Y. 2004. What Coyote and Thales can teach us: An outline of American Indian epistemology. In *American Indian thought*, ed. Anne Waters. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell.
- Burkhart, Brian Y. 2019. *Indigenizing philosophy through the land*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press.
- Callison, Candis. 2014. *How climate change comes to matter*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
- D'Arcangelis, Carol L. 2018. Revelations of a white settler woman scholar-activist: The fraught promise of self-reflexivity. *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 18 (5): 339–53.
- Darnell, Regna. 1999. Rethinking the concept of band and tribe, community and nation: An accordion model of nomadic Native American social organization. In *Papers of the twenty-ninth Algonquian Conference*, ed. David H. Pentland. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press.
- Davis, Lynne, et al. 2017. Complicated pathways: Settler Canadians learning to re/frame themselves and their relationships with Indigenous peoples. *Settler Colonial Studies* 7 (4): 398–414.
- Deloria, Vine, Jr. 1999. *Spirit and reason*. Golden, Colo.: Fulcrum.
- Fitzmaurice, Kevin. 2010. Are white people obsolete? Indigenous knowledge and the colonizing ally in Canada. In *Alliances*, ed. Lynne Davis. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Gehl, Lynne. n.d. Ally bill of responsibilities. [www.lynngehl.com](http://www.lynngehl.com).
- Kearns, Faith. 2017. Water is life, relationality, and tribal sovereignty: An interview with Melanie Yazzie. *The Confluence*, October 24.
- Keefer, Tom. 2010. Contradictions of Canadian colonialism: Non-native responses to the Six Nations Reclamation of Caledonia. In *Alliances*. ed. Lynne Davis. Toronto, Ont.: University of Toronto Press.
- McGregor, Deborah. 2009. Honouring our relations: An Anishinaabe perspective on environmental justice. In *Speaking for ourselves*, ed. Julian Agyeman et al. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.
- McKinnon, Rachel. 2017. Allies behaving badly: Gaslighting as epistemic injustice. In *The Routledge handbook of epistemic injustice*, ed. Ian J. Kidd, José Medina, and Gaile Pohlhaus, Jr. New York: Routledge.
- Monture-Angus, Patricia. 1999. *Journeying forward*. Halifax, N.S.: Fernwood.
- Namaste, Viviane. 2015. *Oversight*. Toronto, Ont.: Women's Press.
- Norton-Smith, Thomas M. 2010. *The dance of person and place*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Owens, Ernest. 2020. White people, please stop declaring yourself allies. *Philadelphia Magazine*, June 15.
- Peck, Raoul, director. 2016. *I am not your negro*. Velvet Film. 1 hr., 35 min. <https://www.velvet-film.com/en/films/i-am-not-your-negro/>.
- Pratt, Scott L., 2006. Persons in place: The agent ontology of Vine Deloria, Jr. *APA Newsletter on American Indians in Philosophy* 6 (1): 4–9.
- Reo, Nicholas James, and Kyle Powys Whyte. 2012. Hunting and morality as elements of traditional ecological knowledge. *Human Ecology* 40: 15–27.
- Rose, Deborah B. 1998. Totemism, regions, and co-management in Aboriginal Australia. Presentation at the Conference of the International Association for the Study of Common Property, Vancouver.
- Sealey, Kis. 2018. Transracialism and white allyship: A response to Rebecca Tuvel. *Philosophy Today* 62 (1): 21–29.
- Shelby, Candice L. 2016. *Addiction*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Shrestha, Keshab, et al. 2008. *Study of sustainable biodiversity conservation*. Lalitpur, Nepal: National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities.

- Simpson, Leanna B. 2017. *As we have always done*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Smith, Andrea. 2005. *Conquest*. Cambridge, UK: South End Press.
- Smith, Andrea. 2013. Unsettling the privilege of self-reflexivity. In *Geographies of privilege*, ed. Frances W. Twine and Bradley Gardener. New York: Routledge.
- Snelgrove, Corey, Rita K. Dhamoon, and Jeff Corntassel. 2014. Unsettling settler colonialism: The discourse and politics of settlers, and solidarity with Indigenous nations. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 3 (2): 1–32.
- Sobrevida, Claudia. 2008. *The role of Indigenous peoples in biodiversity conservation*. Washington, D.C.: The World Bank.
- Sullivan-Clarke, Andrea. 2020a. Decolonizing “allyship” for Indian country: Lessons from #NODAPL. *Hypatia* 35 (1): 178–89.
- Sullivan-Clarke, Andrea. 2020b. Empowering relations: An Indigenous understanding of allyship. *APA Native American and Indigenous Philosophy Newsletter* 19 (2): 2–8.
- Sullivan-Clarke, Andrea. 2020c. Empowering relations: An Indigenous understanding of allyship in North America. *Journal of World Philosophies* 5 (1): 30–42.
- Treuer, David. 2021. Return the national parks to the tribes. *The Atlantic*, April 12.
- Tuck, Eve, and K. Wayne Yang. 2012. Decolonization is not a metaphor. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1 (1): 1–40.
- Tuck, Eve, and K. Wayne Yang. 2014. Unbecoming claims: Pedagogies of refusal in qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry* 20 (6): 811–18.
- Whyte, Kyle P. 2014. Indigenous women, climate change impacts, and collective action. *Hypatia* 29 (3): 599–616.
- Whyte, Kyle P. 2017. Our ancestors’ dystopia now: Indigenous conservation and the Anthropocene. In *Routledge companion to the environmental humanities*, ed. Ursula K. Heise, Jon Christensen, and Michelle Niemann. New York: Routledge.
- Whyte, Kyle P. 2018a. On resilient parasitisms, or why I’m skeptical of Indigenous/settler reconciliation. *Journal of Global Ethics* 14 (2): 277–89.
- Whyte, Kyle P. 2018b. Settler colonialism, ecology, and environmental justice. *Environment and Society: Advances in Research* 9: 125–44.
- Whyte, Kyle P. 2018c. White allies, let’s be honest about decolonization. *Yes! Magazine*, April 3.
- Whyte, Kyle P. 2020a. Against crisis epistemology. In *Handbook of critical Indigenous studies*, ed. Brendan Hokowhitu et al. New York: Routledge.
- Whyte, Kyle P. 2020b. Too late for Indigenous climate change justice: Ecological and relational tipping points. *WIREs Climate Change* 11 (1): e603.
- Whyte, Kyle P., Chris Caldwell, and Marie Schaefer. 2018. Indigenous lessons about sustainability are not just for “all humanity.” In *Situating sustainability*, ed. Julie Sze. New York: NYU Press.
- Wildcat, Daniel R., 2009. *Red alert*. Golden, CO: Fulcrum.
- Wolfe, Patrick. 2010. Settler colonialism and the elimination of the native. *Journal of Genocide Research* 8 (4): 387–409.

**Andrew F. Smith** is Associate Professor of philosophy and environmental studies at Drexel University. He publishes widely on environmental philosophy, social and political philosophy, and decolonialization. His latest book is *The Threefold Struggle: Pursuing Ecological, Social, and Personal Wellbeing in the Spirit of Daniel Quinn* (SUNY Press, 2022). Earlier books include *The Deliberative Impulse* (Lexington, 2011) and *A Critique of the Moral Defense of Vegetarianism* (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2016). Previous articles have appeared, among other journals, in *Environmental Philosophy*; *Journal of Philosophy of Disability*; *Politics, Philosophy & Economics*; *Philosophy & Social Criticism*; *Journal of Value Inquiry*, and *Social Theory and Practice*.

---

**Cite this article:** Smith AF (2023). Decolonizing Allyship and Settler Support for Indigenous Climate Justice: A Note of Thanks to Andrea Sullivan-Clarke. *Hypatia* 38, 439–449. <https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2023.18>