



PROJECT MUSE®

---

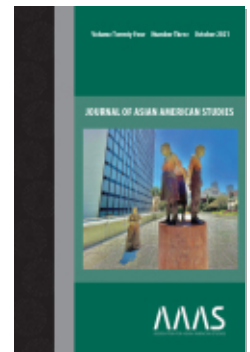
Arctic and Asian Indigeneities, Asian/North American  
Settler/Colonialism: Animating Intimacies and  
Counter-Intimacies in Avatar: The Last Airbender

Xine Yao

Journal of Asian American Studies, Volume 24, Number 3, October 2021,  
pp. 471-504 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jaas.2021.0036>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/836649>



# ARCTIC AND ASIAN INDIGENEITIES, ASIAN/ NORTH AMERICAN SETTLER/ COLONIALISM

*Animating Intimacies and Counter-Intimacies in  
Avatar: The Last Airbender*

**Xine Yao**

**ABSTRACT.** By bracketing whiteness, *Avatar: The Last Airbender* reorients us to how global colonial modernity produces biopolitical difference as a technology of management to defamiliarize Asian and Indigenous relationalities. Approaching it as a site of alternative contact, I consider Lisa Lowe's intimacies of colonial comparative processes in apposition with insurgent counter-intimacies. This essay traces portrayals of Asian imperialism, colonialism, and Asian diasporic settler colonialism in tandem with comparative Indigeneities and decolonial solidarity. *ATLA* engages Asianness and Indigeneity together in a mode that is relational but not statically schematic, extending influential work by scholars thinking across Indigenous, Asian, and Asian diasporic studies.



Figure 1. Map of the world of *Avatar: The Last Airbender*

Identifying the competing interpretations of geographical spatiality and historicities that inform racial and decolonial identities depends upon an act of interpretation that decenters the vertical interactions of colonizer and colonized and recenters the horizontal struggles among peoples with competing claims to historical oppressions. These vertical interactions continually foreground the arrival of Europeans as the defining event within settler societies, consistently place horizontal histories of oppressions into zero-sum struggles for hegemony, and distract from the complicities of colonialism and the possibilities for anticolonial action that emerge outside and beyond the Manichean allegories that define oppression.

— Jodi A. Byrd, *The Transit of Empire*

“Water. Earth. Fire. Air. Long ago, the four nations lived together in harmony. Then everything changed when the Fire Nation attacked. Only the Avatar, master of all four elements, could stop them, but when the world needed him most, he vanished. A hundred years passed and my brother and I discovered the new Avatar, an Airbender named Aang. And although his airbending skills are great, he has a lot to learn before he’s ready to save anyone. But I believe that Aang can save the world.”

— Opening sequence of *Avatar: The Last Airbender*

In 2007 the United Nations General Assembly passed the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Although most governments in Asia voted for the declaration, they questioned, if not denied, the possibility of Indigenous peoples within their territories. As Long Xuequn argued on behalf of the Chinese delegation to the 1997 United Nations Commission on Human Rights,

The indigenous issues are a product of special historical circumstances. By and large, they are the result of the colonialist policy carried out in modern history by European countries in other regions of the world, especially on the continents of America and Oceania .... In China there are no indigenous people and therefore no indigenous issues.<sup>1</sup>

Nonetheless, peoples in Asia and elsewhere mobilize via self-identification as Indigenous because Indigeneity's inherent claim to sovereignty empowers demands for cultural and political self-determination, catalyzing local struggles into transnational networks of solidarity.<sup>2</sup> Denials of historical and present-day Asian (neo)colonialism and imperialism by nations like China and Japan therefore resonate with disavowals by the Asian diasporas of any role in the service of the settler colonial nations they inhabit. As Haunani-Kay Trask (Kānaka Maoli) articulates in the case of the occupied territory of Hawai'i, "Asian success proves to be but the latest elaboration of foreign hegemony."<sup>3</sup>

Scholars in Indigenous studies and Asian diasporic studies advocate for methodological approaches that can illuminate these overlapping and shifting dynamics of racializing and colonizing processes produced by, and yet exceeding, the boundaries of modern nation states. Chickasaw scholar Jodi A. Byrd calls for new means for addressing the cacophonies of competing horizontal and vertical interactions through colonialisms and diasporas. More recently, Antonio T. Tiongson Jr. challenges Asian American studies to take on critical sustained considerations of Indigenities, Native theorizing, and settler colonial critique modeled by Asian Canadian studies.<sup>4</sup> In this regard, Lyko Day and Quynh Nhu Le both propose frameworks for understanding the occluded, uneven position of racialized peoples, particularly Asians, that complicate the standard settler-Indigenous binary (Day's aforementioned Native-alien-settler triangulation in North America and Le's figuration of settler racial hegemonies in the Americas broadly).<sup>5</sup> However, most of the thinking about Asian-Indigenous relationalities, as Gage Karahkwí-io Diabo (Kanien'kehà:ka) observes, has come from Asian North American scholars such as Day, Candace Fujikane, Malissa Phung, and Larissa Lai. Diabo asks that this reckoning be reciprocal: he references Leanne Simpson (Michi Saagiig Nishaabeg) who regrets that Idle No More did not engage more in lateral alliances between marginalized peoples. Asian-Indigenous coalition, he suggests, would allow Indigenous peoples to decenter whiteness and act as "a means of self-location and interrogation on the local."<sup>6</sup>

Indebted to this emerging scholarly conversation that confronts dichotomized Asian and Indigenous differences, I seek to locate such an experiment in popular culture. The critically acclaimed and hugely popular

Nickelodeon children's cartoon *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, which ran for over three seasons from 2005 to 2008, opens each episode with storytelling by the major female character coded as circumpolar Indigenous. Katara of the Southern Water Tribe's monologue narrates the central dynamics of Fire Nation imperialist aggression and anti-imperialist resistance by our heroes Katara, her brother Sokka, and Aang of the Air Nomads who is the titular Avatar. Distinctive references predominate for each nation's assemblage of cultural influences: the adversarial Fire Nation, Japanese and Chinese; the Water Tribes, Inuit; the Air Nomads, Tibetan; and the Earth Kingdom, broadly East Asian. Within each nation are those gifted with the ability to "bend" their respective elements through the practice of Chinese martial arts; only the Avatar, continually reincarnated between each of the four nations, can bend all the elements. The story's opening sequence begins at the South Pole, which is no *terra nullius* but an outpost of Southern Water Tribe resistance even if depleted by the Hundred Year War. After introducing each element performed through bending, the opening sequence displays a map that orients the viewer to the geopolitics of this world (figure 1). The Earth Kingdom, the largest landmass, is positioned to the east; the Fire Nation to the west; the Air Nomads have temples in each cardinal direction; the Water Tribes located at both poles. Maps in popular genre fiction typically reproduce the history of cartography as a colonial technology: spatial distinctions become historical differences that serve to isolate peoples, which Mark Jerng calls a "denial of historical coevalness."<sup>7</sup> The show, however, remaps our geographical assumptions: the Asian-inspired cultures are central, not a faraway Orient. The camera zooms from the South Pole before panning up to display the world: we are presented this South Pole as a home that is the starting point for the adventure, in stark contrast to the common understanding of Antarctica as the last region to be "discovered." Disrupting dominant narratives of migration and discovery that privilege the North, the Southern Water Tribe siblings and Avatar Aang from the Southern Air Temple come from a global South on their quest into the rest of the world. I propose that this children's fantasy cartoon offers us what Paul Lai and Lindsey Claire Smith might recognize as a site of "alternative contact" between Indigeneity and Asianness.<sup>8</sup> The assemblages of the show's worldbuilding foreground often-occluded convergences between Asian colonialism, Asian North American settler colonialism, and Arctic and Asian Indigeneities.<sup>9</sup>

By bracketing whiteness, *Avatar: The Last Airbender* produces an opportunity to defamiliarize racializing and colonizing processes and to examine an alternative vision of modernity. Asian and Indigenous cultural inspirations are central to the promotion and appeal of this anime-inspired,

American-produced show; however, the series lacks explicit citations to actual historical events. Even so, the de- and re-contextualized allusions of this children's show perhaps allow for subtler and more complex insights to be inferred. Illustrating the scale of this popular show as an international cultural phenomenon, the original show begat a reviled live action film, a sequel cartoon about the next avatar, various other media franchise tie-ins such as several ongoing comics series, and the promise of a live-action Netflix remake and Nickelodeon's rival formation of Avatar Studios, a division led by the original creators dedicated to producing further content within that world. During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, *ATLA* found new audiences and re-galvanized established fans with a release on multiple streaming platforms.<sup>10</sup> The animated series heralded a shift that paved the way for our current era of children's cartoons lauded for racial and LGBTQ+ diversity such as *Steven Universe* and the reboot of *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*.

But I am wary of the easy valorization of representation as a political palliative. My analysis concerns the stakes of the structural and generative implications of the *worldbuilding* toward the *worldmaking* of anticolonial critique and decolonization; I build upon Mark Jerng's argument that the "racial worldmaking" of popular genre fiction entails narrative and interpretive strategies for apprehending and organizing the world in ways racist and antiracist. As Denise Ferreira da Silva and other thinkers have argued, global modernity is inextricable from biopolitical difference as a technology of management: *ATLA's* worldbuilding, set during a period analogous to our nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, contributes to conversations about different apprehensions of that unfolding modernity that may be mobilized for antiracist and decolonial ends.<sup>11</sup> The cartoon engenders opportunities for considering Asian-Indigenous enmeshments that can be obscured, overlooked, and disavowed by the overrepresentation of the legacies of European colonialism that produced the modernity of Western hegemony.

Setting aside the subsequent multimedia franchise, I am interested in how *ATLA* enables us to critique these underrecognized Asian-Indigenous entanglements in order to grapple with enduring structural inequalities resisted by Indigenous peoples that are perpetuated by Asian political regimes and diasporic peoples. In urgent and necessary ways, *ATLA* can make visible the messiness that ensues when we look—not away, but askew—at the normativizing politics of recognition characteristic to white settler colonial nations indicted by Dene scholar Glen Coulthard.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the show stresses that "Asian" and "Indigenous" are not mutually exclusive categories, speaking to the heterogenous dynamism of Indigeneity as a

political identification in relation to different national and regional regimes of racialization and colonization; in this regard I follow the insights of Byrd, Maile Arvin, and other Indigenous thinkers who stress that Indigeneity is not collapsible into the category of race, and moreover that racializing and colonizing processes are intertwined but not synonymous. *ATLA*'s disorienting worldbuilding can reorient our worldmaking attention to the structural in ways that deepen understandings of Asian-Indigenous comparative positionalities through which we may not only better critique such relationalities but also imagine insurgent possibilities.

My speculations arise out of a practice of rewatching that centers the Native-alien dimension of Day's formulation of Native-alien-settler triangulation: I, a descendent of Chinese immigrant settlers, rewatched the show with Kavelina E. Torres, a Yup'ik, Inupiaq, Athabaskan, Black writer and filmmaker from the Holy Cross and Aniak Tribes who lives in North Pole, Alaska where they work in the Indigenous science fiction and fantasy universes.<sup>13</sup> Previously, I had watched the cartoon on my own and wondered about the imbalance of attention given to its Asian versus Indigenous elements and that potential meaning-making; through rewatching with Kavelina and our conversations long after, I was able to develop this argument. Our encounter—and friendship—was initially situated on the ancestral, traditional, and unceded territories of the Musqueam people at a colonial institution of higher education, colloquially called by racists the "University of a Billion Chinks," which has been reclaimed as a significant site of Indigenous resurgence. There we, along with other BIPOC friends, shared an investment in speculative genres as sites of joy, politics, and imagination. "We understand indigenous study as a practice of *thinking with*, not as a process of overcoming or mastery (especially in an academic field sense), but instead as a process in perpetuity, a process of becoming that is also an unbecoming, always entangled in the shaping and relational violences of imperialism," write Manu Vimalassery, Juliana Hu Pegues, and Alyosha Goldstein.<sup>14</sup> *Rewatching with*, therefore, may act as a critical methodology of intimate encounter, reflection, and sustained engagement that attends to Asian-Indigenous relationalities not merely as a case study in this burgeoning field of scholarship but as the praxis of solidarity between Indigenous and Asian diasporic peoples. A critical *rewatching with* generatively unsettles sedimented attitudes to a familiar object in ways epistemological and affective: it reconfigures assumptions and implications surrounding processes of meaning-making and identification through an approach to communal spectatorship attuned to difference as much as convergence, thereby challenging the practice's typical connotations of repetition as soothingly familiar affirmation. In regard to *ATLA*, such a *rewatching with*

troubles the usual framing of the re-consumption of children's media as comforting, naïve nostalgia; our rewatching with one another leverages the unevenness between the widespread collective Asian interpellation of the show as a point of identification and the neglected experiences of Indigenous audiences, specifically circumpolar viewers. To honor our relationship, my analysis will occasionally shift to incorporate Kavelina's insights from our ongoing dialogues as a means of unsettling the discursive register of disciplinary academic knowledge. Our conversations have continued even as they have returned to traditional territories in Alaska and I moved to London, England, the former imperial metropole; I have shared every iteration of this essay with them, making the research, writing, and publication process a sustained catalyst for maintaining our friendship.

According to Diabo, space needs to be made for the validity of the ugly, as well as the positive, affects of Asian-Indigenous solidarity. Lisa Lowe provides a lens for understanding the constitutive relationship between the affective and structural with her important theorization of the imbricated intimacies of nonequivalent colonial exploitation of and violence against Black, Indigenous, and Asian peoples as the conditions of global modernity. Thus these structural intimacies generate the usual sense of the private intimacies of the implicitly white modern liberal subject.<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, this hegemony is not totalizing despite its attempts at overdetermination: Lowe gestures towards what might develop from those "imminent, potential alliances among subjugated people."<sup>16</sup> Elsewhere, I build upon her insights to appositionally track what they term the insurgent counter-intimacies that emerge from the asymmetries of Black and Asian intimacies in the Caribbean to foil Asian antiblackness through the refusal and weaponization of opportunistic proximity to whiteness; in this case, I hope to address another dimension of the enmeshment of the intimacies of modernity that will require hard reckonings with complicities, but can still salvage the promise of decolonial counter-intimacies that can never be taken for granted. Following Diabo, our communal practice of *rewatching with* shifts the focus from whiteness, acting as a manifestation of counter-intimacies of care, critique, and shared joy.<sup>17</sup>

The growing body of scholarship on Asian-Indigenous relationalities examines crucial works based on real-world historical events involving Asian-Indigenous encounters. In turning to the realm of speculative genres, I wonder what creative and political possibilities can emerge from the potency of such worldmaking that may offer us a different understanding of, to use Larissa Lai's phrase, "an epistemology of respect."<sup>18</sup> The quest to "save the world" from the Fire Nation's project of global domination brings together an anti-imperialist coalition of the Avatar, in this iteration born



of the Air Nomads; the Southern Water Tribe siblings; and later a recruit from the Earth Kingdom; finally, even a Fire Nation former main antagonist.

I look to the ways in which *ATLA*'s fantasy world enables us to attend to under-examined Asian-Indigenous relationalities to diagnose the workings of imperialist and colonial projects as well as the forms of anti-imperialist and decolonial resistance. Concomitant to greater attention to comparative Indigenous struggles across the globe and grounded in local specificity, the scope of my analysis seeks to consider the workings of Asian colonialism and Asian settler colonialism. The solidus in Asian/American, writes David Palumbo-Liu, signifies "a choice between the two terms, their simultaneous and equal status, and an element of indecidability" wherein there co-exists both distinction and movement.<sup>19</sup> In this regard, I proffer Asian/North American alongside settler/colonialism as useful terms that express the uneasy dependence and difference between colonialism and settler colonialism and as structures that implicate Asians regardless of citizenship and/or migrant status with an eye to the specificity of East Asians given their overrepresentation in the show's referents. This essay moves through four sections that trace the confluences between Arctic Indigeneity, Asian Indigeneity, and Asian/North American settler/colonialism loosened from the foreclosure of rigid identarian analysis. 1) I address the show's asymmetrical recognition as a cultural product predominantly associated with Asianness rather than Indigeneity in its production and reception by scholars and broader audiences; this settler colonial erasure attempts to foreclose Indigenous viewership and the unsettling interpretive possibilities that come from giving equal weight to Indigeneity. 2) I then move to analyze the signifying elements of the world-building put into motion by the storytelling: rather than replicating the proliferation of identifications of Asian and Indigenous referents already compiled comprehensively by fans, I seek to take these identifications not as representations of identities, but in the sense of identificatory processes and interpretive strategies to make visible occluded Asian-Indigenous relationalities. They provoke meditations on the enmeshments of Asian/North American participation and complicities with imperialism, colonialism, and settler colonialism that impact Indigenous peoples grounded as circumpolar, Asian, and otherwise. 3) Next, I move to an appraisal of how these violent intimacies present the conditions of possibility for the counter-intimacies of comparative Indigeneities. 4) Finally, I conclude with the struggle for reparative Asian-Indigenous solidarity despite the entrenched positioning of the settler/colonizer. I discuss the two most popular—and rival—heterosexual romantic pairings of the main characters as allegories for grappling with the unruly affects of Asian-Indigenous solidarities: they model different

urgent fantasies of resurgence and reconciliation that test, and possibly exceed, the limits of the state's politics of recognition.

Although the overarching narrative arc of triumph-despite-adversity characteristic to children's shows gives an optimistic vision of solidarity, *ATLA's* sincerity models the good faith required for solidarity work that does not overlook accountability. Genre is more than vehicle: the intermingled expansiveness and tenderness of a children's show, in which friends are on a quest to save their world, allows us to scale up and down on the axes of the structural and the personal in order to animate a speculative analysis of Asian-Indigenous intimacies and counter-intimacies. I invite my readers to attend to *Avatar: The Last Airbender's* pedagogic capacity to provoke critical ways of watching with, thinking with Asianness and Indigeneity together—perhaps even prompting rewatching and reconsidering of your own—in a mode that is relational, not statically schematic. Solidarity, as Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández points out, is undertheorized especially in relation to decolonization: undergirded by the didactic drive of the genre of children's media, the show's long-form narrative models the fragile and contingent unfoldings of solidarity as characters struggle to come to critical consciousness regarding decolonization and the political implications and material sacrifices that must be grappled with.<sup>20</sup>

### ***ATLA* Production and Reception: Asian-Indigenous Asymmetries**

In a 1997 interview, Nickelodeon executive John Hardman spoke about the network's stance on race in its programming. Focusing on Black and Latinx representation in children's media, Hardman remarks briefly, "The Asian kids are not as concerned about representation as the other groups. They accept that Asians aren't represented and when they are, it's often stereotypical."<sup>21</sup> There is no mention of Indigenous kids. Sarah Banet-Weser writes about diversity as key to the network's brand identity and its crafting of children's consumer citizenship: while racial representation operates as a commodity in their shows and is expressed through style and thematic elements, an ethos of colorblindness prevails. As she remarks, "This is ultimately the problem of consumer citizenship: representational practices offer what looks like a more inclusive, more democratic society—but one with no political referent or practice."<sup>22</sup> Nickelodeon's *Avatar: The Last Airbender* premiered in 2005 to popular and critical acclaim, foregrounding what appeared to be Asian and Indigenous representations—although officially referenced by the creators as influences but not confirmed as peoples. Indeed, a legitimate thread of argument may view the show as

a continuation of Nickelodeon's diverse but depoliticized representative strategy driven by market appeal that is a counterpart to Jodi Melamed's critique of the liberal multicultural literary canon as cooptation of antiracist demands.<sup>23</sup> What if we were to rewatch against that agenda, to take seriously *ATLA's* portrayal of a world marked by Asian and Indigenous signifiers, characters inflected by those cultural and physical phenotypes, and its story about imperialism, colonialism, and anticolonial resistance—as *political*?

Although Asianness and Indigeneity are never named as such in the show's universe, the series' cultures and characters are perceived as non-white because of the density of cultural and visual references and allusions. "You want to be inspired without appropriating," says head writer Aaron Ehasz on the decision not to base the design of the nations on a single culture. "You don't want to accidentally say something about a culture. For example, early on a lot of the designs for the Fire Nation were inspired by designs from Japan, which was a problem—you have a bad nation, and if all their designs were Japanese, you'd project a poor message about their culture. We completely reworked the art so that it would be more broadly inspired."<sup>24</sup> The live-action film adaptation, *The Last Airbender* (2010), directed by M. Night Shyamalan, infamously cast all the good characters as white, while the Fire Nation characters were brown. Online fan communities sparked and sustained widespread critiques. Critics Lori Kido Lopez and Tim Gruenewald argue that the backlash against the film's whitewashing reproduced racial essentialism and Orientalism.<sup>25</sup> Gruenewald dismisses fan efforts as only reading "their Asianness into them because of the contextual Asian cultural references such as costume and architecture."<sup>26</sup> Contra to Lopez and Gruenewald, I wish to linger with the importance of the viewers' impassioned widespread refusal of the film's whitewashing: for many, Asian and Indigenous representations were more than shallow aesthetics. Viewed from another perspective, fans do not apply a naïve and reductive understanding of race to the show but engage with racialization's complexity and the performative basis of identity through it.<sup>27</sup> The world-making trained viewers, to paraphrase Jerng, to notice the salience of race and racism that in turn galvanized a generation toward antiracist critique.

Over a decade later, the Facebook page *subtle asian traits*—as of late 2021 boasting over 1.9 million users predominantly across Asia and the Asian diaspora—is evidence of how the show's perceived Asianness continues to resonate with viewers and fans. References and memes based on the show are regularly posted and receive thousands of likes, the only cultural object whose creators are not Asian that receives such sustained positive attention on this Facebook page.<sup>28</sup> Indigenous kids are part of the audience as well, contrary to the silence of the erstwhile Nickelodeon

executive about the existence of Native viewers. When I began talking with Kavelina about the show, they remarked that they loved watching it with their children in Alaska because it gave them the rare opportunity to see major characters who looked like the Yup'ik, Inupiaq, and Athabaskan communities to which they belong. (In 2019, *Molly of Denali* became the first children's show to feature an Alaska Native as protagonist). With the promise of a live action remake of the show by Netflix, Indigenous fans like Yup'ik and Kass'aq activist Ruth Dan speak publicly about the need for casting Native actors and debate *ATLA's* Indigenous representation and its connections to Asianness.<sup>29</sup> Indigenous peoples' participation in popular culture is often ignored due to what Michelle Harris and Bronwyn Carlson critique as a continuation of the colonial binary between authenticity and modernity. In actuality, they engage in an "*indigenization of popular culture*": "Despite a well-developed understanding of the perils of mass media and the capitalist system, Indigenous people find pleasure within it and often by subverting and rearranging it to suit."<sup>30</sup> To turn to one pertinent illustration, Taqralik Patridge, an Inuit spoken word artist, writer, and throat singer, uses manga as her example to illuminate the untapped creative possibilities if Inuit were to collaborate with non-Western peoples. "My kids are crazy about manga," she remarks.<sup>31</sup> Crosscultural appeal gestures towards the hope for crosscultural creative and political cooperation.

Nevertheless, as Kavelina likes to bring up both critically and laughingly, we cannot forget that show creators Michael Dante DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko are both white Americans. Bearing this in mind, it is worth addressing in brief the depth of engagement with Asian and Asian diasporic collaborators. Of the voice acting cast, the most prominent actor of color is Filipino actor Dante Basco as the antihero Fire Nation Prince Zuko, while former Fire Lord successor and ex-general Uncle Iroh was voiced by Makoto "Mako" Iwamatsu, a founding member of East-West Players, the first Asian American theatre troupe; other veteran Asian American voice actors include fellow East-West Player alumnae James Hong and George Takei. Since Chinese is the show's written language the production employed an academic consultant, Siu-Leung Lee, to ensure accuracy of the calligraphy; similarly, they hired Edwin Zane, the then-vice president of the Media Action Network for Asian Americans, to make sure that all aspects of Asian representation were done with sensitivity.<sup>32</sup>

This ethos of collaboration can also be seen on the level of technical production. Like most American studios, *ATLA* outsourced animation to South Korea; however, the show departed from usual practices to give JM Studio and Moi Animation much greater roles in the creative process. Typically, American studios send Korean animators strict timing indicators

and expect them to adhere to the exact vision of storyboards. Instead, the Korean animators were given the freedom to figure out the timings, to add details to scenes, to follow the impressions of the emotion in recorded dialogue rather than just the voice actors' mouths. In a behind-the-scenes documentary, many of the artists describe infusing their own points of view into the details of action and aesthetics, as well as how that freedom forced a more collaborative albeit sometimes challenging work dynamic with colleagues. Animation director Jeong Yoon commented, "it almost felt as if we were the actors doing all the action."<sup>33</sup> Indeed, many minor character designs were based on animators from the Korean studios as well as Asian American members of the production team.<sup>34</sup>

Other modalities of racialization are crucial to the show's production even if they are not overtly on display within the world of the show. To honour Kavelina's self-identification as both Indigenous and Black in defiance of views that claim the terms as exclusionary, I believe it is necessary to limn the role of Blackness. *ATLA's* signature Chinese martial arts choreography was developed by Sifu Kisu, a Black American practitioner whose involvement reflects the history of Black-Asian crosscultural encounter through martial arts exemplified by Bruce Lee and Jim Kelly's friendship.<sup>35</sup> Sifu Kisu modified several existing schools of Chinese martial arts to make each form of elemental bending stylistically distinctive; recordings of his movements were the basis for the animators' rendition of all the fight scenes. The minor but crucial character Piandao the swordmaster is modeled after him.<sup>36</sup> Blackness is an absent presence that contributes to the animation of the show's most distinctive features.

Of course, for all this care paid to meaningful involvement with Asian and Asian diasporic cultures and creators, there is the conspicuous absence of comparable engagement with any Indigenous counterparts.<sup>37</sup> Throughout our rewatching, Kavelina pointed out such inaccuracies as the difference in Water Tribe physiology from that of many Arctic Indigenous peoples, that Sokka's fishing spear in the pilot is an incorrect depiction of Inuit science, an occasional lack of respect for elders by the Water Tribe siblings, and the questionable patriarchal, rather than matriarchal, organization of the Northern Water Tribe. According to the show's origin story, the choice to bring in circumpolar Indigenous representations stems from DiMartino's obsession with "a documentary about explorers who were trapped at the South Pole."<sup>38</sup> In their words, the combination of this documentary with some sketches by Konietzko led to the initial concept as follows: "*There's an air guy along with these water people trapped in a snowy wasteland ... and maybe some fire people are pressing down on them.*"<sup>39</sup> The legacy of Ernest Shackleton and other polar expeditions of the so-called

“heroic age” informs this element of worldbuilding, raising questions about the residues of a history that perpetuated the *terra nullius* justification for colonization and dismissed the validity of Inuit knowledge and sovereignty.<sup>40</sup> Otherwise, Konietzko and DiMartino themselves often elide any mention of Indigeneity when discussing inspirations for the series as a whole, although they make note of specific references.<sup>41</sup> The closest the production comes to engagement with actual Indigenous people is the acknowledged influence of *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner*, the first film to be directed, written, and acted in the Inuktitut language.<sup>42</sup> The failure to involve Indigenous actors and creatives on a level comparable to Asian counterparts indicates a settler colonial erasure that seeks to simply aestheticize Indigeneity in a more sophisticated cartoon version of the “Playing Indian” tradition.<sup>43</sup>

Nonetheless, the show’s juxtaposition of Arctic Indigeneity with Asianness provides a reworking of geopolitical dynamics such as the Alaska purchase, which, according to Yup’ik scholar Shari Huhndorf, advanced simultaneous projects of US continental and overseas expansion for facilitation of trade with East Asia and dominance over the Pacific region. Instead, in *ATLA* people akin to Alaska Natives are major players rather than a suppressed presence populating a conduit for American imperialism.<sup>44</sup> Asian racialization has been key to the particular dynamics that framed Alaska Native peoples as Asian rather than indigenous to the Americas in order to further US empire and undercut land claims.<sup>45</sup> Juliana Hu Pegues outlines how this Orientalist conflation cleaves apart Alaska Native peoples and Asian immigrants—the former dispossessed of land, the latter exploited for labor—since the spatial and temporal logics of settler colonialism dictate “Asians could never be ‘here’ and Alaska Natives could never be ‘now.’”<sup>46</sup> In this light, reading the worldmaking juxtapositions of *ATLA* offers a different vision of the constructed divisions that Hu Pegues regards as designed to foreclose decolonial possibilities.

Still, the asymmetry of privileging Asianness over Indigeneity in considerations of *ATLA* is reproduced by scholars and general non-Indigenous audiences alike. Lopez’s and Gruenewald’s studies, along with a handful of MA dissertations, tend to avoid or briefly gloss over Indigeneity. On websites like *racebending.com*, the name a riff on the show’s titular bending of the elements, careful attention is paid to the details of costume, technology, architecture, and customs down to the different styles of bowing that pointed to real-world Asian referents. Gestures to Indigenous influences and questions about appropriate Indigenous actors are rarer.<sup>47</sup> As Jin, the blogger behind the encyclopedic Tumblr blog *ATLA Annotated*, admits in an entry entitled “Water Tribe Annotations”: “Alas I know next

to nothing about First Nation/Native American Cultures. They are very far removed from my field of study. People keep asking me to annotate them, and I would love to give them an answer but I am sadly not able to do so. This is where you guys come in."<sup>48</sup> There were few responses. This avoidance and ignorance index the discomfort that unintentionally reinscribes Indigenous absence and underlines that confronting Indigeneity unsettles the erasures of settler colonialism.

Perhaps the settler/colonial implications that blur the Asian/North American divide are best seen in the curious post-show work of Siu-Leung Lee, the show's consultant for Chinese calligraphy and culture. Lee, whose doctorate (referenced in the closing credits) is in science, has written several papers (unrelated to the show) that insist the Chinese were the first to "discover" the Americas. Resting his argument on the lost voyages of admiral Zheng He, he interprets Indigenous cultures and peoples on Turtle Island as derivative of Ming China in a project designed to credit the Chinese "for launching the Age of World Exploration."<sup>49</sup> Indigeneity becomes engulfed by the prerogative of Asianness: the same old colonial logics merely revised, not transcended. To ignore the salience of Indigeneity to the show requires willfully ignoring, at the very least, that about half of the primary characters are coded as circumpolar Indigenous.

*ATLA* puts on display the messy intimacies of Asian/North American settler/colonialism alongside the unruly intricacies of Indigeneities that are too often overlooked. I do not wish to replicate the lack of attention to Indigenous viewers who, like Kavelina and their family, can creatively indigenize the cartoon. Instead, I ask, what if we gave Indigeneity the same weight of signification as Asianness on the show? An overinvestment in the Asian aspects of the show at the expense of the Indigenous threatens to reinscribe and valorize both colonialism and settler colonialism simply under an East Asian, rather than white, supremacist ideology. Given the show's constitution as an Asian/North American production and the enduring identification of these demographics with the cartoon, for audiences racialized as Asian the series can act as a template for the project of what Malissa Phung designates as settler of color critique. Simultaneously, the significance of Kavelina's viewership and especially their children's as participants in this speculative worldmaking cannot be ignored; for at stake, as our mutual friend Shelby Loft (Kanyen'kehà:ka) noted, is the survivance of Indigenous futurities.

## Defamiliarizing Asian-Indigenous Elements in Worldbuilding: Asian/North American Settler/Colonialism



Figure 2. The cover of the Blu-Ray edition of *Avatar: The Last Airbender: The Complete Series*. From left to right: Katara and Sokka (Southern Water Tribe); Aang (Air Nomad); Toph Bei Fong (Earth Kingdom); Zuko (Fire Nation).

*ATLA*'s worldmaking reorganizes that “cacophony of competing struggles for hegemony within and outside institutions of power” that Byrd argues distracts from settler colonialism, coercing minoritarian subjects into complicity—even through struggles for social justice.<sup>50</sup> In this section, I map out significant influences associated with each separate nation—not claiming to be exhaustive in these identifications, but rather attending to the meaning-making that arises from these identificatory processes as interpretive strategies. In each episode, Katara's opening narration reminds the viewer of the four elements and their associated peoples:

Water. Earth. Fire. Air. Long ago, all four nations lived together in harmony. Then everything changed when the Fire Nation attacked.

The elements provide a classificatory system reminiscent of nineteenth-century race science, but the show attempts to offset such associations by insisting on lateral differences that only became hierarchical with the intrusion of imperialism (“everything changed when the Fire Nation attacked”). The assemblage of references for each nation stresses circulations of influence, blurring the distinctions that can ossify based on cultural nationalism.



On the other hand, such license with a creative pastiche of influences risks homogeneity despite the promise of heterogeneity, a major concern in light of the perennial flattening out of the complexities of Asianness and Indigeneity in the popular global imagination. For my purposes I suspend prescriptive evaluations of authenticity, wary of essentialization and of naïve representationalism. While I do gloss over character appearances, I only do so briefly because I do not wish to replicate an anthropological gaze obsessed with phenotype, nor accede to a superficial politics of representation. Instead, through inquiry inspired by these identifications, I hope to put pressure on the ways in which even shallow signifiers may enable the apprehension of colonizing and racializing processes thereby giving rise to more aleatory, speculative readings of Asian-Indigenous relationalities.

The show's title references genocide, the originary trauma that sparked the Hundred Year War: Aang is the last airbender because the Fire Nation wiped out the Air Nomads in order to prevent the rebirth of the Avatar who might defeat them. The blazing comet that bequeaths this destructive firebending power will return for its centennial passing by summer's end: if the show's heroes do not defeat the Fire Lord and his army, another atrocity of that magnitude or greater will be unleashed. The optics of the different violences of the Hundred Year War—and the representational politics of the show's depiction of the nations as a whole—spark associations with different Asian/North American settler/colonial complicities that raise implications about their entangled intimacies that the overrepresentation of whiteness can overshadow. An Asian colonizer is still a colonizer: after all, "from the ancestral memory perspective of the original inhabitants of territories that have been overrun and dominated by settler populations, the question of whether a colonizer was Euro-American or from yet another empire is largely immaterial."<sup>51</sup>

The violence of the Hundred Year War is manifold. The Air Nomad genocide left Air Temples abandoned; the war against the Water Tribes includes the insidious violence of cultural genocide through the deliberate project of killing all waterbenders, the keepers of traditional knowledge; in the Earth Kingdom the heroes encounter examples of franchise colonialism for the extraction of natural resources, but also the logic of elimination since villages are murdered and repopulated with Fire Nation civilians. In the final season the heroes infiltrate the Nation by disguising themselves as colonial subjects to exploit the metropole's contempt for its colonies ("The Headband"). A tropical island is shown as a leisurely escape for the Fire Nation elite with no sign of any Indigenous population, evoking Trask's and Candace Fujikane's discussion of Asian settlers in Hawai'i.<sup>52</sup>

Although the peoples of all four elements are referred to as nations, it is striking that only Fire is formally named as such, perhaps in a reflection of the fact that the Fire Nation is the closest to the modern nation-state produced by colonial structures of violence complete with the most highly developed military-industrial complex. As Chelsea Liddell traces through the concept of post-memory, the Fire Nation fits the mold of Imperial Japan, including the exceptionalist, modernizing rhetoric that paternalistically justified colonial expansion as the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere.<sup>53</sup> I suggest that the flexibility of the citations opens up significations about an even greater array of historical and ongoing violences through the various configurations of East Asian strategies of domination wielded against Indigenous peoples and other Asians, including the portrayal of direct participation in colonial violences that are too often overrepresented as belonging solely to the West. The Chinese aspects also stand out, from the nation's palette of red and gold to their brutality towards the Air Nomads coded as Tibetan. Firebending is the only bending that generates its own element: both creative and destructive, in its most common usage it is a practice of aggression, all-consuming like the nation's ideology. The show uses computer graphics strategically: most often, it is Fire Nation military technology like war ships and tanks that are computer-animated, underscoring the sense of their alien invasiveness through the dangerous futuristic discourse of techno-Orientalism.<sup>54</sup> The show restages the turn-of-the-century Yellow Peril invasion genre of popular fiction that Jerng claims instituted a sense of the global, reframing the conflict as East Asia the aggressor against other Asian and Indigenous peoples.<sup>55</sup>

The difficulties of discerning the differences between Fire Nation colonial and settler colonial projects speaks to issues with disentangling these processes constitutive of the intimacies of global modernity. Lorenzo Veracini suggests that colonialism and settler colonialism "should be understood in their dialectic relation: neither entirely separate nor par to the same conceptual field."<sup>56</sup> Veracini insists on the distinctiveness of each in order to more effectively theorize and practice decolonization, but likewise that "their ultimate complementarity within imperialism should not be minimized."<sup>57</sup> Trask, centering the struggles of Native Hawaiians, germanely illuminates that the "color of violence" involves multiple strategies of oppression and interconnected histories of domination.<sup>58</sup> Since the Fire Nation wears a light-skinned East Asian face while practicing these flexible strategies of power, the Asian/North American settler/colonial spectrum of active involvement and passive complicity cannot be so easily navigated nor responsibility disavowed.

In this regard, it is interesting to consider that Earth Kingdom, coded with Chinese and Korean influences, produces both allies and antagonists when the series generally casts other nations as either “bad” or “good.” On the level of appearance, Earth characters show the greatest range of melanin. Despite its name, the Earth Kingdom is organized into independent political units ranging from the defiant metropolis of Ba Sing Se to the neutral village of Kiyoshi to territory occupied by encroaching Fire Nation colonies. Liddell argues the Earth Kingdom “can also be said to represent all [Japan’s] colonial territories.”<sup>59</sup> Ba Sing Se is modeled after the Forbidden City, and the treacherous Dai Li secret police are euphemized as “the cultural authority” (“City of Walls and Secrets”). At the end of the second season, villainous Fire Nation Princess Azula wins the loyalty of the Dai Li, resulting in the fall of the greatest Earth Kingdom stronghold; on the other hand, that same season has the addition of blind earthbending prodigy Toph Bei Fong to the band of heroes. The people of Earth are situated between degrees of alliance with the Fire Nation and coalition with the anticolonial resistance of the Water Tribes and the lone survivor of the Air Nomads; a triadic structure that recalls the liminal positioning of Asians in Lyko Day’s Native-alien-settler schema along with Claire Jean Kim’s model of Asians as triangulated between white and Black people in the United States.<sup>60</sup> Although characterized by their relationship to land, in practice most earthbending is industrial, utilitarian, and even extractive. The worldmaking portrayals of Fire and Earth are well-suited as a mirror for the Asian/North American self-reflections required for Phung’s settler of color critique as “a solidarity project, a mode of self-critique, a process of self-identification that can be reconfigured intersectionally, depending on one’s positionalities and migrant genealogies.”<sup>61</sup>

### **Asian-Indigenous Counter-Intimacies: Arctic and Asian Indigenous Solidarity**

Huhndorf proposes transnationalism as a method for Indigenous studies to seek ways of addressing “alliances among tribes and the social structures and practices that transcend their boundaries, as well as processes on a global scale such as colonialism and capitalism.”<sup>62</sup> The Southern Water Tribe siblings are the Avatar’s first allies: the show’s narrative optics showcase a fantasy version of Arctic Indigenous peoples in coalition with Tibetan. If not for Katara and Sokka’s discovery of Aang in the iceberg, there would be no hope and no story. The siblings are out hunting on the water when they start arguing: Katara calls out her brother’s sexism and the unequal gendered distribution of labor ever since their family was torn apart by colonial violence. She unconsciously uses her waterbending, which leads to

the disruption of the ice and the recovery of Aang: her Indigenous feminist rage catalyzes the Avatar's return to the world.

Transnational solidarity with other Indigenous peoples has been important for many other struggles for self-determination in Asia; for instance, the Uchinānchu, the Indigenous people of Okinawa, allied with the Ainu, also colonized by Japan, as well as the Chamorro in Guam.<sup>63</sup> These Uchinānchu efforts were a reason Dennis Banks, one of the founders of the American Indian Movement, campaigned for a sacred run in Okinawa as part of a summit of Indigenous peoples around the globe. Reading the dynamics of Aang, Katara, and Sokka through the lens of transnational Indigenous solidarity participates in the critical unsettling of Indigeneity as a monolithic concept. Vigilant about how the term can erase specificity, Native Hawaiian feminist Maile Arvin proposes it can be an analytic, not only an identity. Indigenous knowledge and praxis are not necessarily anti-colonial or antiracist, she emphasizes; rather, Indigeneity names historical and ongoing colonial effects and anticolonial demands related to place and the dispossession of that land's peoples. Drawing upon Stuart Hall's concept of articulation, Arvin argues we can view "indigeneity as in articulation with raciality and coloniality" but not reducible to either.<sup>64</sup> By bringing circumpolar Indigeneities into conversation with the ongoing question of Tibetan Indigeneity, the fantastical show enables speculation about political solidarity between distinct articulations of Indigeneity across the globe to unsettle "Asian" and "Indigenous" as mutually exclusive categories.

"Water is the element of change. The people of the Water Tribe are capable of adapting to many things. They have a deep sense of community and love that holds them together through anything," is how the people of Water are described by one character ("Bitter Work"). The show's categorization of the "Water Tribes" as one of the elemental "nations" presents a meditation on the generally held importance of using "nation" as a more authoritative and accurate term for the grouping of Native social and cultural organization and life named by "tribe"; the concept of "nation" has been theorized by Native studies scholars in many, sometimes conflicting, ways in terms of the tensions around Indigenous ideas and the limits of settler-colonial terms.<sup>65</sup> The Water Tribes are the darkest skinned of all the peoples portrayed. Their ways of life, manner of dress, et cetera, are explicitly coded as Indigenous: while the dominant influences are said to be Inuit and Sirenki, aspects of Pacific Islander Indigeneity also come through the obvious centrality of water and traditions of seafaring. Katara and Sokka of the Southern Water Tribe are the ones to make the pivotal discovery of Aang in the iceberg that catalyzes the main plot. Again, it is Katara whose voice opens each episode with the role she and her sibling

play in the hope for a future that will break from the history told to them by their grandmother; this could be recognizable from an Inuit perspective as the shift from *unikkaaqtuat*, traditional stories, to *inuusirmingnik unikkaat*, stories from lived experience.<sup>66</sup> From a certain vantage point, then, an Indigenous feminist tradition of storytelling frames the entire show.

The portrayal of the Water Tribe centers not on clichéd vanishing, but on Indigenous survivance, which is to say, survival as resistance.<sup>67</sup> The show's connection between the Water Tribe and adaptability pays inadvertent homage to Igloolik writer Rachel A. Qitsualik's characterization of Inuit culture as "the embodiment of adaptability itself."<sup>68</sup> The first season follows the antipodal journey from the South to the North Pole, portrayed as a sophisticated civilization that is one of the last great bastions against the Fire Nation. Sometimes referenced as "sister Tribes," the distinct Southern and Northern Water Tribes echo the diversity of Arctic Indigenous peoples who span three continents, four nation states, and many different communities with different histories; their common resistance to the Fire Nation recalls the pan-Inuit coalitions leveraged to assert political sovereignty over their lands and waters, such as the Arctic Council that brings together the umbrella groups the Inuit Circumpolar Conference, Nordic Sámi Council, and the Northern Indigenous Peoples of Russia.<sup>69</sup> Katara is the last waterbender in the South Pole due to the Fire Nation project of cultural and literal genocide that claimed the life of her mother. Waterbending is her practice of tradition and enactment of kinship with her origins; her skills develop over the series as she grows in strength and innovates her techniques, including the rare art of healing. Nonetheless, waterbending is not inherently aligned with good: Katara later encounters bloodbending, a form of waterbending created by a traumatized waterbender living in the Fire Nation that uses extractive logic to violate people's bodily sovereignty. In the pilot Katara refuses her brother's condescending descriptor of waterbending as "magic," anticipating non-Indigenous misunderstandings of what is called Traditional Ecological Knowledge or Indigenous Knowledge, which Sokka concedes is "an ancient art unique to our culture blah blah blah." Since community is key for their culture, it is notable that the Water Tribe is the only nation with more than one person in the primary band of heroes. Sokka, the only non-bender of the main characters, is both the voice of logic and the comic relief; moreover, Sokka emerges as the strategist of the group with a talent for engineering and other sciences. Inuit adapt "Southern methods for strategic purposes," as *qallunaaq* (non-Indigenous) scholar Keavy Martin notes.<sup>70</sup> Despite their sibling frictions, Katara and Sokka illustrate that there is no contradiction between Native practices of traditional and scientific knowledge.<sup>71</sup>

The obvious association between the Water Tribes and common understandings of Indigeneity is environmental stewardship. In her review of Winona LaDuke's impactful Native environmental treatise *All Our Relations: Native Struggles for Land and Life*, Kim TallBear critiques the stereotype of universal Indigenous environmentalism based on romanticized, unchanging tradition; rather, TallBear shifts the focus away from moralizing and to sovereignty, emphasizing practices that "are quite often based in utilitarian views of resources that often (not always) cross over into the sacred, and they are specific to each tribe and its land base."<sup>72</sup> The equivalence between environment and Water Tribe sovereignty is made clear: much like the current encroachment of colonial climate change physically eroding the lands of Arctic Indigenous peoples, Fire Nation imperialist aggression will literally destroy polar ecology, melting the ice as part of the project of conquering the land's peoples. This dimension of the show's central conflict counters the settler environmentalism described by Métis scholar Zoe S. Todd in which "arctic Indigenous peoples and their laws and their philosophies" are readily erased from discussions of climate change.<sup>73</sup> During their travels far from home, Katara helps a village sickened and starved because their waters have been polluted by a nearby metal refinery in service to the Fire Nation military industrial complex: biopolitical justice is not simply healing sick individuals, but destroying the factory, driving out the military, and ultimately cleaning the water ("The Painted Lady"). Katara the waterbender is a water protector, to use the phrase popularized by the protests at Standing Rock against the Dakota Access Pipeline. Our heroes eventually encounter the Foggy Swamp Tribe: this different environment leads to context-specific practices since these waterbenders can bend the water in plants and have a different sense of place based on the swamp ecology as a site of resistance, perhaps an echo of the long history of Black-Indigenous Seminole defiance in the Dismal Swamp. The show attempts to maintain a productive tension between recognizable yet reductive understandings of Indigeneity and the story's portrayal of the Water Tribes as the peoples of change.

Like waterbending, the principle of airbending is about working with the element in your surrounding environment. A society of saffron-robed monks of all genders, the predominantly light-skinned Air Nomads are designed on Tibetan culture from spiritual practices to architecture, to the very choice for this iteration of the Avatar to be born an Air Nomad akin to the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama. The designation as nomadic reflects the four Air Temples scattered throughout the globe as well as the airbending ability to fly with the assistance of a glider or on the back of sky bison. In light of the Tibetan diaspora in exile, the Air Nomads present a

wishful reinterpretation of migrancy as an enviable form of mobility that pays no heed to borders. Air Nomad mobility echoes the historical perception of the threat posed by Indigenous peoples in Asia to imperialist Asian nation-states who saw them as ungovernable.<sup>74</sup>

Apropos to the show's framing of the Air Nomads, in Tibetan studies the question of Tibetan Indigeneity is less about whether the Tibetans are Indigenous than why they may or may not identify as such. There are overlaps between the claims and practices of the Tibetan struggle and the imperatives understood to be fundamental to Indigeneity: issues of sovereignty and dispossession in relation to land, culture, knowledge. Emily T. Yeh argues that Tibetans have avoided explicit identification as Indigenous despite strong similar commitments to the foregrounding of political self-determination bound up with environmental stewardship: for Tibetans in exile who seek political autonomy as an independent state, she insists, Indigeneity is too weak a claim since the People's Republic of China refuses to recognize the term and instead manages minoritarian identities through their classification as *minzu*, the hegemonic framework for the management of diversity and multiculturalism in China.<sup>75</sup> Dawa Lokyitsang challenges Yeh's assessment, arguing that Tibetans based in exile in India were resistant to the term because the history of making claims to Indigeneity in India was bound up with colonial British concepts that required groups to perform their primitiveness for legal recognition. Moreover, during the 1990s Tibetans understood claims to Indigeneity as the pursuit of civil rights from the settler state rather than an actual challenge to the state for sovereignty. Lokyitsang notes that Indigeneity as a term has been decolonized and points to recent trends among Tibetans in exile who see themselves as in solidarity with First Nations and Native American movements like Idle No More and NoDAPL: these Tibetans see the decolonial potential of Indigeneity for self-determination and international coalition-building.<sup>76</sup>

Although popularized visual and cultural signifiers about Indigeneity are most overtly associated with the Water Tribes, the show also transposes common thematic tropes about Indigeneity onto Air Nomad Aang—and interrogates them. *ATLA*'s association of Native stereotypes with Aang allows for a recognizable Indigeneity to adhere to his Tibetan signifiers so as to not only signal Asianness; the stereotypes then are critiqued and counteracted with the help of the Water Tribe characters. For instance, while there is never a conflict depicted between the Water Tribe characters' use of science and practice of tradition, the cliché plays out for Aang when they visit an Air Temple now home to Earth Kingdom refugees who have used pneumatic engineering to modernize the space and thus inadvertently

ruined historical frescoes and statues. In a rare moment of anger Aang berates the refugees: "You just destroyed something sacred!" he cries, sparring with the mechanist about whether such changes follow the principles of nature, with the man admitting, "Unfortunately, progress has a way of getting away from us" ("The Northern Air Temple"). While the mechanist's technology provides his disabled son Teo with a flying wheelchair, he was trading his tech to appease the Fire Nation military. Teo indicts his father's collusion and they join the protagonists in repelling the Fire Nation and severing the refugees' dependency. While Aang once said these flying refugees had "no spirit," he states Teo "has the spirit" of an airbender and sees the new inhabitants as akin to the hermit crab: "Maybe you weren't born here but now you found this empty shell and made it your home. And now you protect each other." The Water Tribe siblings moderate this eventual compromise, since water is the element of change: Sokka with his enthusiasm for science and Katara with her compassion. The episode is an uneasy test of settler colonial justifications against Indigenous principles of hospitality and active kinship.

The "vanishing Native" trope is the showcase par example for this interplay between Arctic Indigeneity and Asian Indigeneity. As per Katara's opening monologue, it is Aang the Avatar who is said to have "vanished." Storytelling is resistance: thanks to the intervention of the Southern Water Tribe, as Katara narrates, the last of the Air Nomads—unlike the last of the Mohicans—has refused to fade away for the dawning of a new era of colonialism. When the protagonists meet Professor Zei, the head of anthropology at Ba Sing Se University, his ethnographic gaze is on Aang, not Sokka or Katara. A comical parody of anthropology's fascination with Indigenous peoples ensues: the professor exclaims that Aang is "a living relic!" and asks the puzzled boy about "the primary agricultural product of your people," and—a nod to the notorious race science of phrenology that used the skulls of Indigenous, Black, and other peoples of color as evidence—measures his head with calipers ("The Library"). Aang is the last airbender, Katara is the last waterbender in the Southern Water Tribe: from this mutual recognition, both survivors of Fire Nation genocidal projects refute the colonial narrative of the inevitability of their extinction, instead choosing the shared struggle for resurgence and a global anticolonial coalition.<sup>77</sup>

In that season the show troubles the dichotomization of Fire/Earth settler/colonizer and Water/Air Indigenous in its initial worldmaking by offering what can be seen as a critique of tendencies to homogenize, and therefore invalidate, the different Indigenous peoples in the settler colonial nations of the United States and Canada via the engulfing framework of



“Asian.”<sup>78</sup> The genealogy of this longstanding conflation goes back to the Bering Strait theory, which posits that Indigenous peoples in the Americas are merely Asians from an early wave of migration. Jodi Byrd traces this idea to Thomas Jefferson: it strips Native peoples of their Indigeneity, affirms Asian settler colonialism, and invokes the Yellow Peril threat of foreign Asianness in the Americas—all in service of naturalizing white settlers. This Orientalizing seeks to “remap indigenous peoples as part of an early wave of Asian immigrants perform[ing] an originary racialization of indigenous peoples as they are recast as immigrants who may or may not be full citizens.”<sup>79</sup> When Aang finally learns firebending from his former adversary Zuko, they both discover that the dragons, thought to be hunted to extinction by the Fire Nation, have been protected by the Sun Warriors, the ancient firebending civilization that turns out to still exist. Their architecture is vaguely modeled after Mayan monuments, and they wear feather ornaments reminiscent of either Plains Indians or the Tupinambá, who were the earlier precedent for the Western association of feathers with anything related to Indigenous people in the Americas.<sup>80</sup> The Sun Warriors reveal an older approach to firebending as a sacred practice of life, which Aang and Zuko adopt. The show elides the complicated pre-colonial politics among Indigenous peoples in Mesoamerica, instead linking those associated signifiers to an alternative cosmology that can combat the dominant imperialist Fire ideology. In a reversal of the Bering Strait theory, in this world Indigeneity associated with Turtle Island and Oceania precedes an Asian civilization—and exists simultaneously in the present.

### **Fantasies of Resurgence and Reconciliation: “Shipping” as Counter-Intimacies**

Narrative actualizes the potential of the show’s signature worldbuilding toward the potential for antiracist and decolonial worldmaking. Diabo writes of Asian-Indigenous coalition, “there is no guarantee of a straight path from bad feeling to catharsis, reckoning, or restitution. The shape of that path is ours alone to create.”<sup>81</sup> *ATLA*’s plot charts the challenging path of subverting the violent structural intimacies of settler/colonialism into anticolonial counter-intimacies via interpersonal intimacies as the plane via which the Earth and Fire characters learn to reposition themselves against the structures that privilege them: Aang, Katara, and Sokka are eventually joined by Toph Bei Fong (Earth) and, in the final season, Prince Zuko of the Fire Nation.

Although Fire is understandably the last to join the Avatar’s team, Toph, too, faces difficulties on her path to coalition as the representative of Earth. She runs away from the comforts of her rich family’s home to

lend her talents to the group. Her blindness is portrayed according to the social, not medical, model of disability; the intersectional consideration of her positioning contributes to her epiphany orienting her beyond the social model toward justice. Unlike other earthbenders, she has a more phenomenological relationship to land: she learned earthbending from the badgermoles, the original earthbenders, “not just as a martial art, but as an extension of [her] senses” (“The Firebending Masters”). While the show always lavishly highlights the kinetic details of different characters’ bending, the camera’s close attention to Toph’s defiantly bare feet emphasizes the tactile, holistic connections between her embodied self and the land. Toph gradually learns that exchanging her family’s condescending ableism for selfish individualism is not a corrective: from Katara, Aang, and Sokka she receives an education about lateral responsibility as part of the ecology of collectivity. Interdependence is not weakness: the Avatar’s strength comes from a combination of all four elements. Mutuality is the show’s principle: by the series finale Team Avatar consists of members from all nations.

Both Phung and Gage stress the importance of the positive and negative affects of Asian-Indigenous coalition: in *ATLA* the privileging of the realm of affect as the site generative of coalition can be best seen in the most popular heterosexual romantic pairings. For the close of this essay, I look to the robust discursive practices of *ATLA* fan culture to provide a generous but critical eye to the popular fandom dichotomy between “Kataang” (Katara and Aang) and “Zutara” (Zuko and Katara)—the show’s paradigmatic examples of “shipping”—as the symbolic slippage between different scales of the intimacies and counter-intimacies between Asian-Indigenous relationalities.<sup>82</sup> This phenomenon was popular enough to be playfully acknowledged in the franchise’s official tie-ins.<sup>83</sup> My interest in concluding with a discussion of Kataang and Zutara is not to comment on the appropriateness of either pairing, but to trace how these romances allegorize political desire.

Water and Air or Water and Fire: in the show Katara and Aang end up together by the finale, whereas no explicit attraction is stated by either Katara or Zuko regarding the other. Nonetheless, fan analyses closely read the dynamics of the character interactions to justify their preferred pairing. The Kataang versus Zutara rivalry, I suggest, triangulates the narrative’s organization around the parallels between Aang and Zuko that are first introduced in the twelfth episode of the first season. In “The Storm” their backstories reveal trauma and responsibility tied to the sense of having failed their respective father figures, as scenes transition thematically between the two and shots are mirrored. These parallels over the series gradually shift from opposition to complement as Zuko makes the pain-

ful journey from antagonist to protagonist. On the level of romance, the couplings represent different configurations of the transformation of the unequal but intersecting violences of colonial intimacies into the alliances of anticolonial counter-intimacies that cannot be disentangled from the personal. Read as indicative of political reproductive futurity, these heterosexual pairings signal rival affective investments in different models of coalitional justice toward the horizon of decolonization: the desires for lateral circumpolar and Asian Indigenous resurgence in the case of Kataang, and the desire for Indigenous-Asian/North American settler/colonial reconciliation in the case of Zutara.

The Kataang reading: Aang repeatedly returns to his memory of Katara's face that first greets him from his century-long iceberg slumber. Katara's friendship and political loyalty to him is unwavering; however, while she sometimes reciprocates his affection, she remains ambivalent about her feelings towards Aang until the finale. From the standpoint of the counter-intimacies of global Indigeneities, Aang's attraction to Katara reflects his immediate affective investment, whereas Katara tries to keep the political and personal senses of counter-intimacies separate. The concluding mutual affection reaffirms mutual recognition between Arctic and Asian Indigeneities, compatible like Air and Water.

By contrast, the reading of a possible Zutara romance between Katara and Zuko is met with vociferous denial by both at different points and can be read as intrinsic to the antagonism between their elements and their structural positioning that paradoxically enhances the appeal of their potential pairing. "Why am I so bad at being good?" Zuko comically laments after his failed attempts to apologize for his past behavior towards the heroes, including his previous betrayal of them and his own uncle Iroh ("The Western Air Temple"). Zuko is "bad at being good" because of his structural positioning as Asian/North American settler/colonizer who has been active in, as well as a complicit beneficiary of, these interlocking systems of imperialist oppression. Aang, Katara, and Sokka have every reason to be skeptical about his commitment to anticolonial coalition, whereas Toph is inclined to generosity, given her own positioning.

The great heel turn of the Fire Nation Prince is rough because Zuko must confront his role in the colonial intimacies that he has been loathe to disavow even though he has been personally injured by them: his father the Fire Lord deliberately burned half his face and banished him to search for the Avatar. His attempts to regain his honor by seeking his father's recognition drive Zuko through much of the series. Instead, Zuko slowly faces his shame over his participation in imperialist violence. He severs his attachments to his own family: he must become unfeeling toward those

structural intimacies that bind him so that disaffected counter-intimacies have the possibility to flourish. Katara is crucial to his change of heart: after they recognize they both lost their mothers to the Fire Nation, she is on the verge of using her waterbending to heal that traumatic scar from his father before Zuko betrays the protagonists. For the finale, Katara fights alongside Zuko against his sister Azula; violating the rules of the *agni kai*, the fire duel, Zuko realizes the folly of battling one-on-one and instead follows his new ethos of community, affirming his chosen kin. It is only with Katara's partnership that he can win. The Zutara pairing represents the romantic consummation of the hard-won counter-intimacies between Asian/North American settler/colonizer and Indigenous feminist. Although unrealized, the persistence of fan investment in Zutara suggests the importance of working through negative feelings, as Gage suggests, which is still reliant upon catharsis as the defining feature of reconciliation.

The heteronormativity of these two rival pairings, however, belies the most popular queer ship: Zukaang. Although the show concludes with the confirmation of Katara and Aang's romance, the preceding scene is the public spectacle inaugurating the hope for new beginnings: after reminiscing about their former antagonism, Aang and Zuko embrace behind the scenes, before standing side-by-side in front of representatives from all the different nations. As part of his coronation as Firelord, Zuko declares, "The road ahead of us is challenging. A hundred years of fighting has left the world scarred and divided. But with the Avatar's help, we can get it back on the right path and begin a new era of love and peace" ("Sozin's Comet"). For similar reasons to the transgressive appeal of the Zuko/Katara dyad due to the initially dichotomous positioning as Indigenous decolonizer versus Asian/North American settler/colonizer, a possible Zuko/Aang match haunts the show, suggesting how the increasing parallels between the two major characters throughout the series might affectively overflow into romantic entanglements. Insofar as structural intimacies provide the conditions for the production of the individual, private intimacies of the modern subject, it is not surprising that audiences would invest in imagining individual, private counter-intimacies as a legible signifier of the decolonial restructuring of counter-intimacies toward a new world of love and peace.

## Conclusion

As the series' storyteller, Katara chooses how the saga ends: her kiss with Aang closes the show as the camera pans upward, recalling the flourish of the opening sequence. Nevertheless, the shift to the horizon mirrors that

the horizon of decolonization is yet to be realized, although the material, political relations of their world have been substantially transformed through struggle. "Native survivance is a continuance of stories," declares Gerald Vizenor (Anishinaabe).<sup>84</sup> When I asked Kavelina the storyteller about shipping, their response was a joke—they would pair Katara with the flying lemur sidekick Momo! Through humor, they gesture toward the generative possibilities of refusing the narrative of heteronormative romance as a privileged metaphor for solidarity; moreover, Kavelina's quip opens up consideration for the place of the other-than human in decolonial counter-intimacies. There are other, more expansive, more playful relationalities we can privilege in our fantasies of justice toward decolonial futures that refuse the foreclosure of imagining solidarity that systemic hegemonic intimacies seek to impose. For us, this solidarity during the many stages of work on this essay took the form of reciprocity with exchanges of writing and knowledge: much as Kavelina commented on the different phases of this article and shared their insights, I gave them feedback on their academic and creative writing on Indigenous futurisms and Afrofuturisms, as well as sending along Indigenous studies scholarship and scholarship on Arctic Indigenous peoples in a minor effort to redress the colonial, institutional barriers to accessing knowledges.<sup>85</sup>

Nonetheless, Asians and Asian diasporic peoples, regardless of citizenship, need to question any affective attachments to the catharsis of the dialectical while still attending to the interplay between the interpersonal and structural registers of intimacies and counter-intimacies. What is the appeal of the mutual recognition of Arctic and Asian Indigenities towards compatible projects of self-determination? Or what motivates the desire for the fantasy of reparative reconciliation between Indigenous peoples and Asian/North American settler/colonizers? Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang close their now-legendary essay "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor" with the injunction that an "ethic of incommensurability" is needed for real decolonization, not "the hope that settlers may one day be commensurable to Native peoples."<sup>86</sup> The show's formal and narrative assemblages of Asian and Indigenous elements exemplify juxtaposition as a practice of relationality and alternative contact, like the practice of *rewatching with*, that sits alongside incommensurability. The defamiliarized juxtapositions of *Avatar: The Last Airbender* may be one iteration of the narrative world-making that can speculatively animate for all of us Lisa Lowe's ruminations about the past conditional temporality of "what could have been" instead of European colonialism.<sup>87</sup> This children's cartoon reframes the current terms of the colonial politics of recognition so we can imagine elsewhere where fantasies of decolonization can be modeled through fantasy—and inspired to actualize them here.

## Notes

Many thanks to those whose feedback helped make this a stronger paper, especially to Mon Teochew Thai organizer Aree Worawongwasu, Shelby Leanne, Frederik Schröer, Emily Floyd, Adrian De Leon, and Christine Okoth for their provocations. This essay was presented at the 2018 Association for Asian American Studies on Ohlone land and a 2019 workshop organized as part of a collaborative research grant with Melissa Gniadek between University College London and the University of Toronto on the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and most recently, the Mississaugas of the Credit River. Thanks most of all to Kavelina Torres for their friendship and the process of rewatching with and our subsequent dialogues that enabled me to think differently and more deeply.

1. Quoted in Christian Erni, "Introduction: The Concept of Indigenous Peoples in Asia," in *The Concept of Indigenous Peoples in Asia: A Resource Book*, ed. Christian Erni (IWGIA Document No. 123, IWGIA and AIPP, Copenhagen/Chiang Mai, 2008), 15.
2. Benedict Kingsbury, "'Indigenous Peoples' in International Law: A Constructivist Approach to the Asian Controversy," in Erni, *The Concept of Indigenous Peoples in Asia* (above, n. 1), 107. There are similar tensions with regard to African nations' support for the Declaration versus the mobilization of Indigeneity as an organizing term for peoples within those nations.
3. Haunani-Kay Trask, "Settlers of Color and 'Immigrant' Hegemony: 'Locals' in Hawai'i," *Amerasia Journal* 26 (2000): 2.
4. Antonio T. Tiongson Jr., "Asian American Studies, Comparative Racialization, and Settler Colonial Critique," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 22, no. 3 (2019): 419–43.
5. Iyko Day, *Alien Capital: Asian Racialization and the Logic of Settler Colonial Capitalism* (Durham: Duke U. Press, 2016); Quynh Nhu Le, *Unsettled Solidarities: Asian and Indigenous Cross-Representations in the Américas* (Philadelphia: Temple U. Press, 2019).
6. Gage Karahkwí:io Diabo, "Bad Feelings, Feeling Bad: The Affects of Asian-Indigenous Coalition," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 20, no. 2 (2019): 267, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649373.2019.1613729>.
7. Mark C. Jerng, *Racial Worldmaking: The Power of Popular Fiction* (New York: Fordham U. Press, 2018), 106.
8. Paul Lai and Lindsey Claire Smith, "Introduction: Alternative Contact: Indigeneity, Globalism, and American Studies," *American Quarterly* 62, no. 3 (2010): 407–36; see also Cari M. Carpenter and K. Hyoejin Yoon, "Rethinking Alternative Contact in Native American and Chinese Encounters: Juxtaposition in Nineteenth-Century US Newspapers," *College Literature* 41, no. 1 (2014): 7–42, <https://doi.org/10.1353/lit.2014.0008>.
9. Carpenter and Yoon, "Rethinking Alternative Contact in Native American and Chinese Encounters" (above, n. 8), 7–42, <https://doi.org/10.1353/lit.2014.0008>.

10. Alex Barasch, "The Stunning Second Life of 'Avatar: The Last Airbender,'" *New Yorker*, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-stunning-second-life-of-avatar-the-last-airbender>.
11. Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (Minneapolis: U. Minnesota Press, 2007).
12. Glenn Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: U. Minnesota Press, 2014).
13. Whether peoples of color can be considered settlers or complicit in national projects of settler colonialism is contentious: Byrd, Day, and Le are among the many scholars to formulate terms to try to capture these complexities, such as the ongoing displacement of peoples as refugees. For instance, Black enslavement and its afterlives rupture a reductive settler-Indigenous binary given the violent erasure of African Indigeneity. By contrast, here I use "immigrant settlers" to make a point about the privileged relationship between voluntary immigration and settler colonialism for my family's experience of the Chinese diaspora. My introduction of Kavelina here follows the wording she gave me for her self-identification.
14. Manu Vimalassery, Juliana Hu Pegues, and Alyosha Goldstein, "On Colonial Unknowing," *Theory & Event* 19, no. 4 (2016).
15. Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham: Duke U. Press, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822375647>.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
17. Christine Yao, "Black-Asian Counterintimacies: Reading Sui Sin Far in Jamaica," *J19: The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists* 6, no. 1 (2018): 197–202.
18. Larissa Lai, "Epistemologies of Respect: A Poetics of Asian/Indigenous Relation," in *Critical Collaborations: Indigeneity, Diaspora, and Ecology in Canadian Literary Studies*, eds. Smaro Kamboureli and Christl Verduyn, 2014, p. 126.
19. David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Stanford U. Press, 1999), p. 1.
20. Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández, "Decolonization and the Pedagogy of Solidarity," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 41–67.
21. Quoted in Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Kids Rule! Nickelodeon and Consumer Citizenship* (Durham: Duke U. Press, 2007), p. 162.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 146.
23. Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* (Minneapolis: U. Minnesota Press, 2011).
24. Nicole Clark, "Avatar: The Last Airbender Is Still One of the Greatest Shows of All Time," *Vice*, July 20, 2018, [https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/5943jz/avatar-the-last-airbender-is-still-one-of-the-greatest-shows-of-all-time](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/5943jz/avatar-the-last-airbender-is-still-one-of-the-greatest-shows-of-all-time).
25. Lori Kido Lopez, "Fan Activists and the Politics of Race in *The Last Airbender*," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 15, no. 5 (2012): 431–45, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877911422862>; Tim Gruenewald, "From Fan Activism to



Graphic Narrative Culture and Race in Gene Luen Yang's *Avatar: The Last Airbender—The Promise*," in *Drawing New Color Lines: Transnational Asian American Graphic Narratives*, ed. Monica Chiu (Hong Kong: Hong Kong U. Press, 2014), 165–87.

26. Gruenewald (above, n. 25), p. 166.
27. Anne Anlin Cheng, *Ornamentalism* (New York: Oxford U. Press, 2018).
28. "Subtle Asian Traits," *Facebook*, accessed Sept. 1, 2019, and July 28 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1343933772408499/>.
29. Jane George, "Netflix Series Needs Stronger Acknowledgement of Inuit Inspiration, Says Yup'ik Student," *Arctic Today*, Sept. 26, 2018, <https://www.arctictoday.com/netflix-series-needs-stronger-acknowledgement-inuit-inspiration-says-yupik-student/>. Thanks to Kavelina for sharing with me what Ruth Dan tweeted under the handle @LowArctic: "race/geography stuff is always complicated but I want to remind people that Inuit Are Asian: just like Yup'ik have lived in North America since time immemorial, Yup'ik have also lived in Asia since time immemorial."
30. Michelle Harris and Bronwyn Carlson, "Introduction: Indigenous Peoples, Popular Pleasures and the Everyday," *AlterNative* 12, no. 5 (2016): 462, 461.
31. Taqralik Partridge and Martin Keavy, "What Inuit Will Think": Keavy Martin and Taqralik Partridge Talk Inuit Literature," Preface by Keavy Martin, "On the Formal Considerations of Writing for the Handbook," Oct. 2019 (2016): 15, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199941865.013.11>.
32. Clark, "Avatar" (above, n. 24).
33. "Behind the Scenes," in *Avatar: The Last Airbender (Book 1: Water)* (Nickelodeon, 2005).
34. "Avatar Extras (Book One: Water)," *Avatar Wiki*, accessed Sept. 1, 2019, [https://avatar.fandom.com/wiki/Avatar\\_Extras\\_\(Book\\_One:\\_Water\)](https://avatar.fandom.com/wiki/Avatar_Extras_(Book_One:_Water)); Bryan Konietzko and Michael Dante DiMartino, *Avatar: The Last Airbender: The Art of the Animated Series* (Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Comics, 2010), pp. 54, 67, 110, 157.
35. Vijay Prashad, "Bruce Lee and the Anti-Imperialism of Kung Fu: A Polycultural Adventure," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 11, no. 1 (2003): 51–90.
36. Konietzko and DiMartino, *Avatar* (above, n. 34).
37. In 2018 Netflix announced a live-action remake of the show with the original creators. Hopefully this oversight will be rectified, otherwise that failure will be even more glaring since mainstream media companies like Disney have adopted more collaborative practices with Indigenous communities.
38. "In Their Elements," *Nick Mag Presents: Avatar the Last Airbender*, 2006, 6, <https://archive.org/details/NickMagPresentsWinter2006/page/n3>.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
40. Hester Blum, *The News at the Ends of the Earth: The Print Culture of Polar Exploration* (Durham: Duke U. Press, 2019).



41. Konietzko and DiMartino, *Avatar* (above, n.34), p. 12.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 42.
43. Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale U. Press, 1998).
44. Shari Huhndorf, *Mapping the Americas: The Transnational Politics of Contemporary Native Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell U. Press, 2009), p. 29.
45. Juliana Hu Pegues, "Field Trip: Settler Orientalism," *Verge: Studies in Global Asias* 5, no. 1 (2019): 12–18.
46. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
47. "The Last Airbender (2010)," Racebending: Media Consumers for Entertainment Equality, accessed Sept. 1, 2019, <http://www.racebending.com/v4/campaigns/the-last-airbender-2010/>.
48. Jin, "Water Tribe Annotations," *ATLA: Annotated*, 2012, <https://atla-annotated.tumblr.com/post/19950847195/water-tribe-annotations-alas-i-know-next-to>.
49. Siu-Leung Lee, "Chinese Mapped America Before 1430," in *International Cartographic Conference July 2–7* (Washington, 2017), 9.
50. Jodi A. Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (Minneapolis: U. Minnesota Press, 2011), xvii.
51. Keith L Camacho, Greg Dvorak, and Miyume Tanji, "To Our Readers; Introduction: Indigenous Asias" 7471, no. 2015 (2019): xiii, <https://doi.org/10.17953/aj.41.1.v>.
52. See Candace Fujikane and Jonathan Y. Okamura, eds., *Asian Settler Colonialism: From Local Governance to the Habits of Everyday Life on Hawai'i* (Honolulu: U. Hawai'i Press, 2008).
53. Chelsea R. Liddell, "New Myths for the Modern Era: Remembering Japanese Imperialism in *Avatar: The Last Airbender*" (Indiana U., 2014).
54. See David S. Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta A. Niu, *Techno-Orientalism: Imagining Asia in Speculative Fiction, History, and Media* (New Brunswick: Rutgers U. Press, 2015).
55. Jerng, *Racial Worldmaking* (above, n. 7), p. 21.
56. Lorenzo Veracini, "'Settler Colonialism': Career of a Concept," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 41, no. 2 (2013): 314, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2013.768099>.
57. Lorenzo Veracini, "Understanding Colonialism and Settler Colonialism as Distinct Formations," *Interventions* 16, no. 5 (2014): 627, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2013.858983>.
58. Haunani-Kay Trask, "The Color of Violence," *Social Justice* 31, no. 4 (2004): 9–16.
59. Liddell, "New Myths for the Modern Era" (above, n. 53), p. 30.
60. Day, *Alien Capital* (above, n. 5); Claire Jean Kim, "The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans," *Politics & Society* 27, no. 1 (1999): 105–38, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032329299027001005>.
61. Malissa Phung, "Asian-Indigenous Relationalities : Literary Gestures of Respect and Gratitude," *Canadian Literature*, Winter (2015): p. 3.

62. Huhndorf, *Mapping the Americas* (above, n. 44), p. 2; Chadwick Allen, *Trans-Indigenous: Methodologies for Global Native Literary Studies* (Minneapolis: U. Minnesota Press, 2012).
63. Ryan Masaaki Yokota, "The Okinawan (Uchinānchu) Indigenous Movement and Its Implications for Intentional/International Action," *Amerasia Journal* 41, no. 1 (2015): 55–73, <https://doi.org/10.17953/aj.41.1.55>.
64. Maile Arvin, "Analytics of Indigeneity," *Native Studies Keywords*, eds. Teves, Smith, and Raheja (U. Arizona Press, 2015): 119–29, p. 121.
65. Stephanie Nohelani Teves, Andrea Smith, and Michelle H Raheja, eds., "Nation," in *Native Studies Keywords* (Tucson: U. Arizona Press, 2015), 157–67.
66. Inuktitut is non-standardized and dialects can vary greatly; here I am drawing upon Keavy Martin's rendition of Inuktitut influenced by her bias for Eastern dialects from the Baffin (Qikiqtaalut) region. Keavy Martin, *Stories in a New Skin: Approaches to Inuit Literature* (Winnipeg: U. Manitoba Press, 2012), p. 10.
67. Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* (Lincoln: U. Nebraska Press, 1999).
68. Rachel Qitsualik, "Nanlunaktuq: The Arctic as Force, Instead of Resource," *CBC News*, Aug. 31, 2006.
69. Eric Alden Smith and Joan McCarter, eds., *Contested Arctic: Indigenous Peoples, Industrial States, and Circumpolar Environment* (Seattle: U. Washington Press, 1997); Huhndorf, *Mapping the Americas* (above, n. 44).
70. Keavy Martin, "'Are We Also Here for That?': Inuit Quajimajatuqangit – Traditional Knowledge or Critical Theory?" *Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 29, no. 1/2 (2009): p. 190.
71. Gregory Cajete, *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence* (Santa Fe: Clear Light Publishers, 2000).
72. Kim TallBear, "Review: *All Our Relations: Native Struggles for Land and Life* by Winona LaDuke," *Wicazo Sa Review* 17, no. 1 (2002): p. 235.
73. Zoe S. Todd, "An Indigenous Feminist's Take On the Ontological Turn: 'Ontology' Is Just Another Word for Colonialism," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 29, no. 1 (2016): 6, <https://doi.org/10.1111/johs.12124>.
74. See James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale U. Press, 2010).
75. Emily T. Yeh, "Tibetan Indigeneity: Translations, Resemblances, and Uptake," in *Indigenous Experience Today*, eds. Marisol de la Cadena and Orin Starn (Routledge, 2007, ebook 2020), pp. 69–97; <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/edit/10.4324/9781003085690/indigenous-experience-today-marisol-de-la-cadena-orin-starn>.
76. Dawa Lokyitsang, "Are Tibetans Indigenous?" *Lhakar Diaries*, Aug. 10, 2017, <https://lhakardiaries.com/2017/12/27/are-tibetans-indigenous/>.
77. Yokota, "The Okinawan ( Uchinānchu ) Indigenous Movement (above, n. 63), 63–64.

78. See for instance Stephanie Nohelani Teves and Maile Arvin, "Decolonizing API: Centering Indigenous Pacific Islander Feminism," in *Asian American Feminisms and Women of Color Politics* (Seattle: U. Washington Press, 2018), 107–37.
79. Byrd, *The Transit of Empire* (above, n. 50), p. 202.
80. Konietzko and DiMartino, *Avatar* (above, n. 34), p. 156. See Elizabeth Hill Boone, "Seeking Indianness: Christoph Weiditz, the Aztecs, and Feathered Amerindians" *Colonial Latin America Review* 26, 1 (2017): 39–61, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10609164.2017.1287323>.
81. Diabo, "Bad Feelings, Feeling Bad" (above, n. 6), p. 268.
82. "Shipping" derives from "relationship" and often employs the lexical blending of two names to signify fandom investment in that romantic dyad.
83. Kurt Matilla, director. *Avatar Spirits*, documentary, 2010.
84. Vizenor, *Manifest Manners*, (above, n. 67), p. 1.
85. Please consider checking out Kavelina's work. Their latest short stories: "Technician Qamaq North," in *Carousel: Hybrid Literature for Mutant Readers* 46 (Summer 2021): <http://carouselmagazine.ca/c46-torres/>; "Kegg' and Qiuq," in *She Said Notes* 4.4 (Aug. 2019): <https://www.shesaidnotes.com/notes/kegg-and-qiuq>. They are completing a short story collection currently entitled *Math Problems in Space and Time: A Collection of First Stories from the Tundra*.
86. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): p. 36.
87. Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (above, n. 15), 40–41.