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Settler Xicana: Postcolonial and Decolonial Reflections on Incommensurability

THE CONJUNCTURE between decolonial and postcolonial approaches to critical knowledge production is as fraught as it is potentially productive. Feminist practitioners have much to gain from conjoining these discourses and movements in spite of—or rather *because* of—the incommensurabilities between them and around which each field circulates. I take the intersection between Chicana and Native feminisms as a point of entry to consider how these dynamics get played out within specific sites of knowledge production. To complicate Chicana feminist treatments of indigeneity, I draw on my own identity as a Californio Rancho descendent to explore urgent questions of landedness raised by Indigenous studies scholars, leading me to consider how we might productively center questions of settlement within Chicana feminism. My positionality is incommensurate with any easy alignment with indigeneity, even as I long for and feel, along with other Indigenous-identified Xicanas, a strong connection with my Indigenous ancestry. Even though it is tremendously productive to imagine Chicana identity as a natural extension of the Aztec empire or our relationship to land through the queer mythology of Atzlán—I want to push for theorizing the relationships among Chicana identity, indigeneity, and land as incommensurate. While Chicana relationships to land are varied, I reflect on my own positionality as a “settler Xicana” in an effort to sense the political

and epistemic stakes for centering decolonial approaches in conversation with postcolonial/transnational feminisms.

In spite of the seeming affinities between postcolonial and decolonial approaches, the fields seem to run along parallel tracks. While Indigenous studies and postcolonial studies, for instance, draw on a similar canon (for example, Frantz Fanon) and attend to related questions of thinking and imaging beyond the colonial, the fields have yet to build strong ties.¹ A preoccupation of postcolonial studies is challenging, analyzing, and reimagining the cultural legacies of colonialism, from discipline formations such as Orientalism, to the psychic effects of internalized colonialism, to the neocolonization of “Third World” peoples.² In her well-known essay, “Under Western Eyes,” Chandra Mohanty explores the “monolithic” construction of “Third World Woman” in Western feminist texts, evoking colonization as a discursive formation that codifies knowledge about Third World women through categories.³

Such questions and decolonial unsettlings, too, are of central importance to Indigenous studies scholars, who also interrogate colonial legacies and the cultural production of Indian erasure. Sandy Grande, in conversation with Eve Tuck, for instance, describes the construction of the “Indian Problem” in ways that resonate with Mohanty’s critique of “Third World Woman”: the “Indian Problem” is “first and foremost, a problem that has been consciously and historically produced by and through systems of colonization: a multidimensional force underwritten by Western Christianity, defined by White supremacy, and fueled by global capitalism.”⁴ In spite of these theoretical and political affinities, the conversations between these fields, Jodi Byrd and Michael Rothberg argue, has “largely been foreclosed.”⁵

Among other reasons, Indigenous studies scholars are suspicious of the “post-” in relation to “colonial” for “confronting the ongoing

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1. Jodi A. Byrd and Michael Rothberg, “Between Subalternity and Indigeneity: Critical Categories for Postcolonial Studies,” *Interventions* 13, no. 1 (2011).
 2. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978); Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963).
 3. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “‘Under Western Eyes’ Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles,” *Signs* 28, no. 2 (Winter 2003): 519.
 4. Eve Tuck, “Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities,” *Harvard Educational Review* 79, no. 3 (2009): 415.
 5. Byrd and Rothberg, “Between Subalternity and Indigeneity,” 4.

colonization of native lands remains at the top of the agenda for indigenous peoples.”⁶ Postcolonial studies scholars have been complicating such periodizing readings of the *post-*, arguing for the complex work the term suggests for critically interrogating the cultural production of what Stuart Hall describes as “difference/différance” in the wake of formal colonization. In his essay “When Was ‘The Post-Colonial?’: Thinking at the Limit,” Hall argues that the *post-* exists in a complex relation to the term it precedes. It signals not simply a temporal marker, a rupture, or a simple reversal.⁷ At its best, the *post-* signifies an ongoing interrogation of the term with which it is paired, marking an uneasy relationship that resists any final settling of the matter. In spite of Hall’s named suspicion and complex treatment of the *post-*, Indigenous studies scholars largely reject this nuance. Aboriginal writer Kathryn Trees asks, “Does post-colonial suggest colonialism has passed? For whom is it ‘post’? Surely not for Australian Aboriginal people at least, when land rights, social justice, respect and equal opportunity for most does not exist.”⁸ Trees’s conclusion that “Post-colonialism is a ‘white’ concept” by Western nations to “define and represent themselves in non-imperialist terms” suggests the extent to which the *post-* signifies a violent erasure of the colonial for Indigenous studies scholars and First Nation writers.

Indigenous studies scholars also question the fit between “models developed as a response to colonization of the Indian subcontinent and Africa” and those that emerge in response to settler state formations.⁹ The project of decolonization is centrally concerned with the settlement of Indigenous land, which is “rooted in the elimination of Indigenous peoples, polities and relationships from and with the land,” making the field “conceptually distinct from other kinds of communication.”¹⁰

6. Ibid.

7. Stuart Hall, “When Was ‘The Post-Colonial?’: Thinking at the Limit,” in *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, ed. Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti (New York: Routledge, 1996), 242.

8. Kathryn Trees, “Postcolonialism: Yet Another Colonial Strategy?” *Span* 1, no. 36 (1993): 264–5. See also Anita Heiss, “Post-Colonial—NOT!” from the online Teaching Guide to the *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Aboriginal Literature*, <http://macquariepenanthology.com.au/files/CriticalReadingPostcoloNOT.pdf> (accessed August 30, 2017).

9. Byrd and Rothberg, “Between Subalternity and Indigeneity.”

10. Corey Snelgrove, Rita Kaur Dhamoon, and Jeff Corntassel, “Unsettling Settler Colonialism: The Discourse and Politics of Settlers and Solidarity with

Decolonization is fundamentally about life lived on stolen Indigenous land for, as Patrick Wolfe explains, “Territoriality is settler colonialism’s specific, irreducible element.”¹¹ For Audra Simpson, the land’s centrality to the project of the nation state is organized through settler “desire for land,” which “produces ‘the problem’ of the Indigenous life that is already living on that land.”¹²

The pervasiveness of the “problem” of Indigenous erasure means that the production of critical projects, such as postcolonial theory, participates in the erasure of Indigenous genocide and conquest. For Chickasaw theorist, Jodi Byrd, the production of critical projects such as cultural studies circulates through the erasure of Indigenous genocide and conquest. Byrd’s careful genealogical critique reveals that “prevailing understandings of race and racialization within US post-colonial, area, and queer studies depend upon an historical aphasia of the conquest of indigenous peoples.”¹³ The methods culture critics deploy, such as genealogy and deconstruction, presume and participate in the erasure of Indigenous peoples not as modern subjects, but rather as “located outside temporality and presence,” which is particularly egregious in the “face of the very present and ongoing colonization of indigenous lands, resources, and lives.”¹⁴ In their essay, “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor,” Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang argue that we must interrogate how we construct “decolonization” as a noun instead of a verb (decolonize). When we prioritize social justice, civil and/or human rights, and equality efforts, it is easy to elide the more uncomfortable work of examining questions of landedness, racial categories, and settlement.

The convergences and incommensurabilities that mark the junctures and gaps between these projects also animate Chicana feminist knowledge, cultural, and identity production. Drawing on the work of postcolonial and transnational feminist scholars, Chicana feminists

Indigenous Nations,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, and Society* 3, no. 2 (2014): 7–8.

11. Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (December 2006): 388.
12. Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 19.
13. Jodi Byrd, *Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 24.
14. *Ibid.*, 6.

are interested in questions of diaspora, hybridity, and the production of new forms of difference in the move from colonial occupation to postcolonial forms of rule organized through structures of media, migration, and the movement of goods and people in late capitalism. Working at this intersection, for instance, Emma Pérez proposes the decolonial imaginary as a “time lag between the colonial and the postcolonial, that interstitial space where differential politics and social dilemmas are negotiated.”¹⁵ Chicana feminism, like other US Third World feminisms, arises from the conjuncture of US social movements of the 1960s as Chicanas found themselves falling between the cracks of the Chicano movement, which prioritized race and class discrimination, and the women’s movement, which foregrounded gender equality and in some cases challenged homophobia. Recent Chicana feminist scholarship productively integrates transnational and postcolonial perspectives, while other Chicana feminists (especially Xicana, Indigenous-identified Chicanas) integrate Indigenous perspectives into their theorizing.

In spite of these various convergences with the fields of postcolonial and, to a lesser extent, decolonial feminisms, little Chicana feminist scholarship has conjoined these perspectives to examine questions of multiple displacements, migration, and diaspora in conjunction with questions of landedness. Chicana feminists such as Ana Castillo and Cherríe Moraga have described Xican@s, Chicán@s, and Mexican@s as diasporic peoples, whose land bases have been stolen through US conquest of the US Southwest, creating a contradictory Xican@ citizenship.¹⁶ This framing of Chicana identity aligns Chicán@ and Indigenous experiences of dispossession and suggests a parallel struggle for land and sovereignty. One of the differences between Indigenous women and Indigenous-identified Xicanas is the recognition that Chicanas’

15. Emma Pérez, *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

16. Castillo underscores the similarity between the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (between Chicán@s/Mexican@s and the United States) and the countless treaties the United States has created—and violated—with Native Americans. See Ana Castillo, *Massacre of the Dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma* (New York: Plume, 1995), 3. Moraga observes, “We are told we are citizens of a country which crafted its nationhood by thieving our own original nations.” Cherríe L. Moraga, *A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness: Writings, 2000–2010* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), xvii.

Indigenous ancestry and connections to land are often erased through the displacements generated through Spanish colonization, while Native women more often recognize their lineage, tribal affinity, and connection to a land base.¹⁷ To bridge the space between Chicana and Native feminists, Susy Zepeda argues for a queer Xicana feminist frame that deconstructs the mythical homeland of Aztlán as a settler project—a critical approach to the “notion of territory that positioned the ancestors of Chicanos as the original peoples of the US Southwest, disregarding other Indigenous peoples and histories.”¹⁸ Such a frame urges us to consider how Mexicans, Mexicanxs, and Chicanxs often have a complex relationship to Indigenous identity: on one hand, families often share “stories that speak of abuelas indígenas with pride,” while on the other hand, they engage in “fierce denials of Indianness that elevate European ancestral ties.”¹⁹ Beneath such vacillations between desire for and rejection of our Nativeness is a settler consciousness that compels us to undertake a critical examination of Chicanx relationships to land and Native dispossession.

This ambivalent relationship to indigeneity emerges from the Spanish conquest of what is now Mexico and the formation of the Mexican nation state through biological and cultural *mestizaje*. Chicana identity, Sheila Contreras argues, is a myth based on an anthropological tradition of Indigenous extraction. In her book *Blood Lines*, she develops the concept of “indigenism” as she traces meso-American symbology associated with Chicana feminism back through Chicano nationalism, Mexican nationalism, Spanish settlement, and the imperial project of primitivism in the arts and literature. Contreras persuasively deconstructs the Mexica symbols that animate Xicana-Indígena art and performance: the serpent goddess, Coatlicue, the moon goddess, Coyolxauhqui, and

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17. These connections to ancestry and land vary across contexts and differ for urban and tribal Indians. For urban Indians share the Xicanx theme of “loss of relationship to their communities of origin,” see Bonita Lawrence, *Real Indians and Others: Mixed-Blood Urban Native Peoples and Indigenous Nationhood* (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), xvi.
 18. Susy J. Zepeda, “Queer Xicana Indígena Cultural Production: Remembering through Oral and Visual Storytelling,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society* 3, no. 1 (2014): 119–141, 126.
 19. Sheila Marie Contreras, *Blood Lines: Myth, Indigenism, and Chicano/a Literature* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), 1–2.

the broader mythology of reclamation or work of “re-memory” that animates Chicana@ ambivalence vis-à-vis indigeneity. Contreras argues for a “critical discussion of indigenism” that examines “the grounds upon which resistance to empires, old and new, finds expression.”²⁰

While Contreras’s critique is vital to the production of a more critical Chicana feminism, her postcolonial feminist framework focuses on the discursive formation of indigenism without a robust examination of geography, land, and settlement. By placing Contreras’s critique in conversation with decolonial theory, we might productively interrogate the production of Chicana indigenism within the context of Indigenous erasure *and* the contradictions of Mexicanx and Chicanax landedness. Chicanax historians narrate Mexican conquest in ways that foreground US annexation of what are now the Southwestern states through the Mexican-American war.²¹ The unspoken subtext is that mestizos living in these regions were Mexican settlers of Native lands. My ancestors, for instance, were settlers of the Chumash and Tongva regions of what is now Santa Monica, Venice Beach, and the Pacific Palisades. In what follows, I read my family history within the broader context of the settlement of Alta Mexico to consider how Mexicans have both participated in the violent displacement and conquest of Native peoples *and* been subjected to violent displacements and conquest at the hands of Anglos. By joining decolonial and postcolonial perspectives, we might more critically interrogate these incommensurate dynamics of Chicana identity and the un/settling grounds upon which we build our politics.

In the process of writing my monograph *Queer Xicana: Performance, Affect, and the Sacred*, I am recognizing the urgency of integrating these incommensurate projects through a critical examination of Chicanas’ complex relationship to land. Part of the project is an autoethnographic inquiry into my identity as a “settler Xicana.” While these terms seem to be at odds — a “Xicana” strongly identifies with her Indigenous heritage and aligns her politics with Indigenous struggles, while settlers occupy and “feel at home in [others’] homeland(s)” — I am finding this very quality of incommensurability to be most productive.²² I experience these

20. Ibid., 165.

21. See Rodolfo F. Acuña, *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2007).

22. Snelgrove, Dhamoon, and Corntassel, “Unsettling Settler Colonialism,” 5.

contradictions in various contexts: I engage in Indigenous-inspired spiritual practices that both connect me with my own Indigenous ancestry (our family tree and community ties connect us to Yaqui and Gabriellino-Tongva) *and* participate in the replacement and displacement of American Indians, what Scott Lauria Morgensen calls “non-Native queer modernities”²³; I own a home in Woodland Hills, California, at the northeastern edge of the Californio Rancho, Rancho Boca de Santa Monica, the land the Mexican government deeded to my ancestors in the early 1800s for their service in the Spanish-American War.

Queer Xicana emerges from my desire for indigeneity, for my own queer Xicana indigeneity—a desire complicit with the indigenization of the settler. I have followed this desire to sweat lodges and spirit dances in search of my lost Indigenous ancestry. It has been nourished by the voices of Chicana lesbianas on the strange fruit of the figure of the Indigenous women and Mexica goddesses that populate Chicana feminist theory, poetry, and fiction. My desire brought me to my cousins, who trace our family tree with care and precision, passion and pride. We are a Californio Rancho family, descendants of the original families of the Ysidro-Reyes Mexican land grant. My desire brought me back from the chilly climes of Iowa, where I taught for ten years, back to the rolling hills of Alta California, where my ancestors farmed the land and worked on the long wharf and gave birth and buried their dead, some since the 1700s. The Rancho Boca de Santa Monica stretched from the south end of what is now Santa Monica up to the Topanga Canyon. I now live in a home just east of the northeast corner of that land. As I hike in the hills, I imagine I walk in their footsteps. I body surf at the beach where my grandfather rode his horse, Nig (anti-black racism was constitutive of Californio racial formations).

My desire brought me to want to integrate all of this—the family, the sweat lodge and dances, the healing work of recovery, the forked tongue of Malintzín—through my writing. And through the messy

23. Scott Lauria Morgensen writes, “The phrase suggests a settler colonial logic that disappears indigeneity so it can be recalled by modern *non*-Natives as a relationship to Native culture and land that might reconcile them to inheriting conquest.” See Scott Lauria Morgensen, *Spaces Between Us: Queer Settler Colonialism and Indigenous Decolonization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 12.

process of writing, my desire shattered. As I sit as an initiate at the feet of Indigenous feminist scholars and feel the rhythm of their story-telling and the sheer force of their theorizing, I have come to recognize my desire as a *settler* desire. A settler desire for the mystique of mythic Indians, not the sovereignty of real ones; for Native spirituality, not Indigenous appropriation; for an unfettered Xicana-indigeneity, not a wretchedly complex identity as a Xicana-settler. As I engage the work of Indigenous feminist scholars, poets, and writers, my desire for indigeneity, for my own indigeneity, becomes complicated by the fact that I am a settler of *their* homelands.

In her essay, “A Similar Place: Self-Narrativization as Literary Praxis in Black and Native Women’s Literary Memoir,” Theresa Warburton reads Native American and African American women’s literature in relation to space, place, land, and displacement.²⁴ Focusing on the work of Deborah Miranda (Chumash) in her tribal memoir *Bad Indians*, Warburton’s method deepens comparative ethnic studies analyses and pedagogies by grounding them not only in shared experiences of violence, but also in relations to the land. This method enables her to navigate the complex relations between Black and Native histories and experiences, which rejects narratives of “‘naturalized geographies of violence’ that calculate Black and Native life only in terms of social death rather than social value” to “allow for a reckoning with the specificity of Black and Native histories.”²⁵ Warburton’s comparative method is productive for reading my story in conversation with Miranda’s, to unpack specific social geographies that shape a California Indian and a Californio Xicana. I place this decolonial reading practice in conversation with a postcolonial reading of Citlali Sosa-Riddell’s historiographical research on Californio women in an effort to consider how these methods bring to light mutually productive, yet incommensurate interpretations of power and conquest.²⁶

24. Theresa Warburton, “A Similar Place: Self-Narrativization as Literary Praxis in Black and Native Women’s Literary Memoir,” in *Cultural Studies* <-> *Critical Methods* 17, no. 1 (February 2017).

25. *Ibid.*, 42.

26. Citlali Sosa-Riddell, “Demanding Remembrance of the Mexican-American War: Mexican-American Women and Honor Culture,” paper presented at Western Association of Women Historians Conference, Sacramento, CA, May 14–16, 2015.

I recognize so much of my own history in Miranda's story, but through their inversions and erasures, as her stories reveal the photographic negative of the images of my life. For instance, she critiques Californians' romance with the missions and the "Intense pressure is put upon students (and their parents) to create a 'Mission Project' that glorifies the era and glosses over both Spanish and Mexican exploitation of Indians, as well as American enslavement of those same Indians during American rule."²⁷ I have a faint memory, like glimpsing nine-year-old me through a dirty window, of constructing a sugar-cube mission. I lay out a cardboard base. Perhaps I paint it green. I do not imagine the land as Red. I hold bumpy cubes between my fingers, carefully dabbing Elmer's glue and placing each cube to match the picture of the mission in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Perhaps I build a replica of the Mission San Juan Capistrano, inspired by the photograph of my parents, young and dashing on their wedding day. Their eyes are cast to the left side of the photo as if something has caught their attention. My mother smiles widely, her head tossed slightly back, pearl teeth shine against her copper skin. My father, a few shades lighter, stands behind her, his head erect and his whole face beaming as if he's prepared to follow her into eternity. They stand before a fountain in the courtyard of the Mission San Jan Capistrano. Different from and similar to my ancestry, the "story of California" Miranda tells is of her young English, French, Jewish mother, Madgie, and her Chumash, Esselen, Ynez Mission Indian father, Al, and the "wispy-haired" daughter they produced.

Attending to the "similar places" Miranda's and my ancestors have called home exposes both the similarities and differences that shape the lives of Native and Xicana women—in relation to land and love, settlement and dispossession, affect and geography.²⁸ There are "similar places" here, to use Simpson's term, that "use experiential self-storying to explore how individuals and communities are bound to the history of US imperialism, exacted through territorial, geographical,

27. Deborah A. Miranda, *Bad Indians: A Tribal Memoir* (Berkeley, CA: Heyday, 2013), Kindle location 151.

28. Naomi Greyser refers to affective geographies as "palpable emotional connections among subjects that often emerge across boundaries of race, class, and gender." Naomi Greyser, "Affective Geographies: Sojourner Truth's *Narrative*, Feminism, and the Ethical Bind of Sentimentalism," *American Literature* 79, no. 2 (2007): 277.

and topographical mechanisms.”²⁹ Warburton might say that because Miranda’s and my ancestors lived on and worked the land of Alta California, we are positioned in a “similar place,” but her method would also call us to interrogate the differences that constitute each group’s relationship to the land and to one another. I can more fully unpack this difference through a reading of Sosa-Riddell’s historiography, which draws on 1874 interviews with Californio women to explore their complex negotiations in “reconciling themselves to being American” in the wake of the Mexican-American War and the Bear Flag Revolt.³⁰ When I read Sosa-Riddell’s work, I was shocked to hear the voices of Californio women — one who shares my Carrillo surname — so egregiously express settler logics.

One Californiana, Rosalia Leese de Vallejo, describes the illegitimacy of the Bear Flag Revolt in which Anglos arrested high-ranking Californio men as part of the early efforts of US annexation. Leese de Vallejo derides the American pseudo-soldiers, who ransacked the Mexican settlers’ homes and arrested her husband and other Californio men, as “animalistic” and “lacking the basic form of military garb.”³¹ Leese de Vallejo underscores the violence and illegitimacy of the Anglo invaders, characterizing them as a “band of ungrateful horse thieves, trappers and run-away sailors” dressed in “caps made from the skin of coyotes or wolves” and “slouch hats full of holes as black as charcoal,” most of whom were “not wearing shirts or shoes.”³² This reading underscores the contingent quality of conquest and points to the powerful role of “playing Indian” in such processes wherein Anglo performances of “Indianness” enable them to construct an “unassemblable American identity.”³³ In another interview, Teresa de la Guerra spoke of the civilizing work done by the Spaniards, Catholic priests, and Californios, noting, “When the foreigners came here, they found the land free of its primitive ways because the Indians had already disappeared.”³⁴ Even as Californianas reject the

29. Theresa Warburton, “A Similar Place.”

30. Sosa-Riddell, “Demanding Remembrance.”

31. *Ibid.*

32. *Ibid.*

33. Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 5.

34. Citlali Sosa-Riddell, “Demanding Remembrance of the Mexican-American War: Mexican-American Women and Honor Culture” (unpublished manuscript, n.d.).

“foreign” conquest of what de la Guerra describes as “this, my native land,” their accounts align Californio ideologies and material practices with US militarized and genocidal projects of “civilization” over and against the Indians, whose “disappearance” de la Guerra constructs as a project completed through the labor of Mexican settlers.

Tracing my own historiography through Sosa-Riddell’s research helps locate my ancestral relationship to the land in ways that unsettle any easy identification I have with my Native ancestry as an Indigenous-identified Xicana. Further, reading my childhood memories and family photographs in conversation with Miranda’s tribal memoir unearths how similar or shared geographies can engender such different relationships to the land. Perhaps such comparative readings that attend to questions of landedness and dis/possession might enable Chicana, feminist, and postcolonial scholars to interrogate the incommensurate forces that shape variously racialized, gendered, and multiply displaced settler identities. Postcolonial theory productively exposes processes of empire, attuning us to the violence of the material and discursive forces through which colonization manifests itself. But this manifestation is also a process of Manifest Destiny, requiring us to also attend to decolonial theory to interrogate our relationships to settlement— even as colonized peoples. These incommensurate readings of my ancestry and, by extension, my role as inheritor and settler of these California lands lay bare the meaning of my own ancestry as both systematically subjected to racist colonization, land theft, and conquest— *and* as participating in the conquest and disappearance of Native peoples.