

Words matter: How do we begin to acknowledge Brattleboro, Vermont as an Indigenous place? By Jessica M. Dolan, © 2020

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If home is in the stories we share about a place, and knowing those stories make us belong to a place and its people, what happens when the stories of a place get purposefully erased? Or, what happens when truth is so mixed up, that it takes years of many people carefully untangling historical narratives to reveal it? This is what has happened with Indigenous life histories in southern Vermont for the people of VT. Indigenous connections to this landscape and this place have been mythicized. In this podcast, we are going to look at some of the local stereotypes about Indigenous relationships with what became Brattleboro, Vermont. We are also going to learn about acknowledging Indigenous homelands, and explore the possibilities of what an Indigenous land acknowledgement for this place might look like.

My name is Jessica Dolan. I’m a scholar of environment, anthropology, and Indigenous studies, and I am from Brattleboro, VT. Growing up here in the 1980s and 1990s, I was surrounded by hippies, activists, leftist intellectuals, and counter-culture. There were many stories in this area that placed Indigenous peoples on these landscapes in a distant, somewhat mystical past. These stories were often presented as though realities of that past are barely discernable, and suspended in the unknown. Indigenous Historians such as Jean O’Brian, Lisa Brooks, Christine DeLucia, and Margaret Bruchac, among others, all write about this phenomenon in New England. They show how New England settler narratives erased Indigenous peoples’ continuing presence in their homelands here, and that these same narratives continue to perpetuate falsehoods about Native peoples’ relationships with their land, and what they have endured throughout colonization by settlers from Europe. Some New England historical narratives are even patently and deliberately false in their claim that New England was “unoccupied” by Native people, and that other places were simply “given” to European settlers by Native people. As we come up on the 400th anniversary in 2020 of the arrival of the Mayflower at Plymouth, it is high time that we look at the truth of Native peoples’ relationships with Vermont.

Growing up here, I often heard rural legends that I would characterize as “romantic racist.” I call them “romantic racist,” because they fit into a trope that unfortunately still burdens Native people to this day, which is that of the “Noble Savage.” The Noble Savage was a phrase coined by Enlightenment philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau; he claimed during the Enlightenment era that the “savages” – or, people who were Indigenous to all of the places that Europeans were colonizing – were closer to the land, ‘purer’ than the Europeans who were living in places that were undergoing industrial capitalism. The image of the Noble Savage is also associated with Christianity, because the Noble Savage was imagined as still living in the Garden of Eden, untouched by the evils of knowledge, naked, and living as one with nature. One can understand why this beautiful vision of purity and oneness with nature appealed to the hippies and back to the land movement in Vermont, in the late 60s and 1970s when people sought to escape cities, the Vietnam war, and live peacefully in a rural environment.

Characterizations of Indigenous people more often reflect the aspirations of the people settling their homelands, than the stories of Native people themselves. So, for example, while hippies in the 70s in Brattleboro might've imagined "real" Native people to be doing sweat lodges, wearing fringe, teaching sacred survival skills, and riding horses out west, Mohawk and Abenaki iron workers were constructing Vermont Yankee in the early 1970s. Similarly, while the Green Mountain Boys were claiming that Vermont was an "empty land" (or Terra Nullius), there for the rough and independent spirits of settlers who were willing to put in the work to "improve" it, they were fighting Abenaki people for their best-managed cropland and hunting and fishing territories., while denying that what they called Vermont was actually an Indigenous homeland.

Romantic racist tropes about Indigenous history – or lack of it -- in Vermont and New England simultaneously claim that no Native people lived here, and that **real** Native people were peaceable innocents, who helped the settlers survive famine, generously gave their lands to the cause of European settlement, and mysteriously "died off" or left to an unknown place. These stereotypes are in contrast with other stereotypes of vicious savages who killed innocent settlers and religious refugees. These and other false narratives about Native people in New England have had the effect of hiding contemporary Native populations who live here in plain sight, erasing the validity of their ongoing cultures, lives, connections to their homeland, and personhood.

One of the stories that was passed around in Brattleboro when I was growing up in the 80s and 90s, that I have heard as recently as last year, was that Native people did not live in Brattleboro, due to the mysterious "lay lines" that converged here. As the rural legend goes, Brattleboro was such a "powerful" place due to these lay lines, that no Native person would settle here. This little local legend is actually very harmful! It sets Brattleboro up to be a special and mystical place, but it makes it into a special place for settlers, not home to the Abenakis – which is patently false.

These stories and sideways cultural references to Native people and their knowledge were so frequent and compelling when I was growing up, that I longed to know the truth. My grandmother had also told me that my great-grandmother claimed Indigenous heritage from her family lines in Maine. Indeed, many of my friends and neighbors in this area claim distant Indigenous ancestry. So, while people were telling stories about how all the Native people had died off, and that none had lived here in Brattleboro because it was such a sacred place, people were also claiming Native American "blood," expressed in fractions like 1/ 32nd – This expression of blood in fractions is called blood quantum. Dakota scholar Kim Tallbear writes about how the relationships between popular conflation of genetics, race, culture, and ideas of identity expressed in blood percentages contrast with Indigenous realities of kinship and place-based cultural belonging. Describing Indigenous understandings of culture-based kinship, she says, [Indigenous peoples] "...have a truth about how we arose in place as peoples that cannot be contained within a genetic narrative. So, we don't have to reconcile our origin stories about who we are as people with genetic origin stories. But, because genetics has such cultural power in a settler colonial society, we are always faced with justifying our knowledges and our definitions and our histories according to the dominant narratives that they set out, and frankly most other Americans believe" (Tallbear 2019).

With the combination of very distant Indigenous family heritage – which does not make me an Indigenous person -- and intense counter-cultural yet still very settler- colonial local narrative, I knew that something was amiss. This need to know the truth about history and Native cultures in the present was so strong, I ended up pursuing a PhD to study contemporary Native communities' relationships with environment, land and place. I have mostly over the last ten years learned from and worked for the Haudenosaunee – who are the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, and Tuscarora nations. Haudenosaunee homeland is located to the west of Vermont, in upstate New York, Southern Québec, and Ontario, starting with the areas around the city of Albany and moving west. Since returning to my hometown in 2017, I have begun to learn more, both from books *and* from local Native educators, about Abenaki histories in their homeland, which are the areas that are now called Vermont, New Hampshire, the northwestern part of Massachusetts, parts of Maine, and Southern Québec. I share this with you because it can indeed take years of study to unlearn cultural falsehoods that are deeply embedded in national narratives and have been transmitted in our society for hundreds of years. To commence my place-based Indigenous learning in preparation for writing these podcasts, I began to talk to Native people who I met in the area, and read histories by Native and non-Native authors. I learned from my friend Rich Holschuh, who is the Tribal Historic Preservation Officer for the Elnu Abenakis, that since the year of 2012, the Vermont State Government has legally recognized four bands of Abenakis. They are the Nulhegan, Cowasuck, Elnu, and Missisquoi Abenakis.

“Kwai, Kwai! N’delowizi Liz Charlebois, n’dai Warner, New Hampshire. Nia Wobanakik. So what I just said is, ‘Hello my name is Liz Charlebois, I live in Warner New Hampshire, and I am Abenaki.’”

This is Liz Greene Charlebois speaking, in an interview I did with her on the Hogle Wildlife trail by the West River in June 2019. Liz is an Abenaki nurse, seed keeper, gardener, and educator. She also used to chair the New Hampshire State Commission on Native American Affairs. I interviewed Liz to begin my education of Contemporary Abenaki studies, 101.

JD: So, a lot of the listeners of these podcasts might really not know or have ventured at all into learning about contemporary Indigenous Studies in New England. So, one of the questions I wanted to ask is, What would you like to say to them? Even from the very basic to a little bit more complex, like what you just gesture toward. What are some of the things you would like listeners to know? And the listeners for this project are a combination of students, like high school students, and visitors who might come to Brattleboro as tourists, and look at this Words Trail website.

LC: Yeah, for sure. Well, I think one of the first and most important things to know about Indigenous people -- and this is indigenous people across the continent -- is that we all look very different. We all speak different languages, we all have different traditions and different cultures. But even within Wabanaki community we all look very different. I mean, my daughter has blue hazel eyes, and so she looks she looks different than me. And a lot of us are “white passing.” But we also have a community connection, and so that's another component of it too. And I guess this is more cautionary for people who may discover that they have some Indigenous descendency, is that just because you're descended from a Native person somewhere does not necessarily mean that you are a Native person yourself. Because there's it's a lot more complicated than just having this bloodline.

I mean, Elizabeth Warren [*both laughing*] right off the top of my head! You know, just because her DNA proves that she has some Cherokee back there however many generations ago, does not make her a Native person, because she did not grow up Native. She doesn't know any of the culture. She doesn't know any of the traditions. And there is a distinction. And a lot of other people would add language into that. In the Northeast, I wouldn't necessarily make language a part of it. Language is very important and I think we all should learn our native language. But at the same time, you know, we're talking 500 years of colonialism here. So, it's hard to hang on to everything in five hundred years.

JD: It's not the same as the West Coast, at all.

LC: It is not. It is not. So, my point being, just because you may have some descendency does not mean that you are going to automatically be accepted into the community. And you know and there's hard work in order to do that. And my cautionary words are, you really need to look and listen and learn from elders or people who have been part of these communities their whole lives before you automatically adopt yourself into one of them. Because, I see a lot of -- excuse the term -- but a lot of bastardization of Abenaki traditions and cultures. Because people just say, "Hey, I found this in my genealogy, and I'm an Indian, and I'm gonna go join in the first powwow I see. And this is the way things are gonna be because some book told me that's how it goes." You know, and that does a lot of damage.

So, in terms of Native folks and literature, I'm speaking from a New Hampshire perspective here, and it may be different than in Vermont, but I know in New Hampshire there was a definite distinct movement to write Indians out of history. So, and we even see that now in New Hampshire. And that's how weak the state can have its head in the sand and say, "Oh, there were no Indians in this area. They all left in the 1700's." It's because they've been consciously writing native people out of history. And saying things like, "Oh the last Indian died in 1730," or something like that or "moved away" when that's not the reality. But it's in writing, so it has to be "true." You know what I mean?

So, there's a big period of time where you don't hear about Abenaki folks in New Hampshire because they're not written about. Or you'll hear things like, "There is a group of gypsies that lived outside this town." But, in fact, the gypsies were just Abenaki people. And we're not a big settlement people like a lot of other tribes, so we lived in extended family groups outside of community. So, we don't have those big, you know, areas like Akwesasne and Kahnawà:ke. You know, we have two reserves that are *miniscule* in Canada. And that's because they were more refugee camps. And, in fact like the makeup of some of those reserves are not even necessarily historically Abenaki people, but they're sort of like a melting pot of refugees.

JD: Could you describe, where is an Abenaki homeland? Like, traditional territory.

LC: That's a great question.

JD: And, who are the different, I mean, are there different Abenaki Nations, or bands, or how would you describe the different groups, which is probably not the right word, of Abenakis?

LC: Yeah, sure! And Abenaki homeland is actually land-wise the biggest in New England. We take up all of New Hampshire, all of Vermont, parts of Maine, parts of Massachusetts, and a good portion of Québec. The landmass of N'dakinna is really huge. And to address your question about bands versus tribes, nations--

JD: -- Because lots of people don't even know what words to use for that.

LC: For sure. Well, and honestly, I think it's evolving right now, because of the state recognition. So, I know a lot of the state-recognized bands are considering them considering themselves separate tribes or nations. And in a governmental sense, that is true. However, culturally I believe that we are all one people. So, if you think about the way different culture groups are made up of -- and I speak in terms of the Wabanaki, but it also works in terms of the Haudenosaunee -- you have this umbrella, that with similar languages and similar cultures. And then, you have each of these little individual separate entities. So, think of like a family you have a family that comes from the same mom and dad, and then you have all the siblings and then they have all their children, and vice versa. And so, the way I see it is Abenakis are all similar culturally. And then we are related to the other Wabanaki nations, you know the Mi'kmaq, the Maliseet, the Penobscot, the Passamaquoddy. We're all cousins.

Liz's introduction to Abenaki realities in the 21st Century is a real, practical counter to all of the mystical or derogatory stereotypes about Native people that I heard growing up. When it comes to correcting miseducation about Native peoples, recognition of who are the First Peoples of a place and where is their homeland are necessary first steps to begin to right the miseducation of our collective past. There is currently an Indigenous cultural resurgence going on across North America. Over the last 400 years, Indigenous people have done everything they could to keep their languages, cultures, and ceremonies alive, while defending their homes and land. Over the last 30 years, due to the lifework of generations of Indigenous peoples, Indigenous peoples have been able to overturn, through combined efforts in Canadian and American courts, and in international fora, many of the same settler colonial laws that were created to cause their genocide, by taking away their land, breaking up their families, erasing their personhood, and eliminating their presence. As a result of intergenerational strength and resilience, and growing Indigenous populations, Indigenous people across North America are currently involved in restoring their languages, ceremonies, agricultural traditions, hunting, fishing, and harvesting, arts, dance, architecture, traditional governance, literature and storytelling, and more.

This is unfolding, unbeknownst to many Americans and Canadians, while the governments of both countries continue in nefarious ways, to erase Indigenous personhood and inherent rights to land. Both the US and Canadian governments continue to deny the inherent rights that are articulated in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The settler colonial political machines that operate through Canadian and American society manufacture seemingly never-ending racism, and therefore ongoing battles to reclaim Indigenous inherent rights and sovereignty in their homeland of North America. And yet, it is also an incredible time of Indigenous resurgence. As many of my friends would say, it's a good day to be Indigenous! What this all means, is there is much ongoing educational work to do with the North American public about racism, stereotypes, settler colonial white privilege.

In photographer and educator Matika Wilbur and Scholar Dr. Adrienne Keene's podcast called, "All my relations," Matika Wilbur says, "When we are on the healing road, it starts with learning our Creation story. And that goes for Indigenous people and for non-Indigenous people, because the space that we occupy has an Indigenous Creation story and a place-based Identity. All of us should learn the Creation Story and the place-based identity of the place that we're occupying, and figure out our role and place in that story and how to contribute to the reawakening of that agreement" (*Wilbur 2019*).

Following Matika Wilbur's advice, this series of Indigenous studies podcasts explores what we now call Brattleboro as an Indigenous place. The place-based identity of *this* place includes ancient and ongoing relationships with the Abenaki people who called themselves Sokoki, who became the Mississquoi and Odanak Abenakis over time, whose homeland this is. Other Indigenous people have also lived in and cared for this place throughout history, including now. The human- landscape relationships here are ever-unfolding – Indigenous and settler identities of this place, as well as the lives of all its non-human inhabitants, constitute its place-based identity. Later in the podcasts about the Petroglyphs, we will consider the Creation Stories that belong to this place. But first, what would an Indigenous land acknowledgement for Brattleboro, Vermont sound like? What is a land acknowledgement?

Dr. Hayden King, who is Anishinaabe from Beau Soleil First Nation, and Professor at Ryerson University in Ontario describes land acknowledgements as follows: "The acknowledgement ... has been practiced to encourage non-Indigenous people to recognize the fact that they are on Indigenous land, and to provoke action among them... and hopefully do something about it. It's sort of an intervention into the business-as-usual conversations...." (King 2019).

So, land acknowledgements should not be formulaic statements that everyone memorizes and recites, to be polite and show that we are politically or morally evolved. Land acknowledgements are only one step in learning. Dr. King points out that they should not be superficial, but rather, begin with a framework, and then the rest is an invitation for non-Indigenous people to learn more and elaborate. In other words, we must always ask the questions, Who are the original peoples of this place? How do they see their relationships and responsibilities toward caring for the health of the land, the water, other species, and all of the future generations here? What are the treaties that were made here between Indigenous people and European settlers, and what is the state of understanding and honoring those treaties as real institutions? Dr. King says, "...The really important aspect of a territorial acknowledgement is the obligation that comes with it.... I would like to see that acknowledgement grow into commitments. Encouraging people to learn and reflect on their relationships – because the acknowledgement is by and large for non-Native people" (King 2019).

To begin a land acknowledgement for Brattleboro, let's begin with whose homeland are we living on. Indigenous and non-Indigenous historians agree, present-day and historical Brattleboro was built by settlers upon the homeland of the Sokoki or Sokwakik, who are Western Abenakis, part of the Wabanaki Confederacy. Archeological evidence demonstrates that Abenakis and their ancestors have inhabited this area since at least 12,000 years ago, since the end of the Wisconsin glaciation (Bruchac 2011: 36). Southern Vermont and New Hampshire, and very northern part of Massachusetts is Sokoki homeland. Just to the south of here was a town called Squaqueag (a

version of the name Sokoki) which is where present-day Northfield was built. To the west, at the juncture of the Hoosick and Hudson rivers are the Schaghticoke and Mahican homelands; Mohawk homelands are to the west of that. To the south, by present-day Deerfield is the homeland of the Pocumtucks; just south of that, the homeland of the Nonotucks. Beyond Pocumtuck, Norwottuck and Woronoco, you will find the homelands of the Mohegans, Pequots and Narragansetts to the south and east. To the east in Massachusetts is the homeland of the Nipmucs and Wampanoags, and the Sowhegans, Pigwackets, and Pennacooks, who are all Abenakis in present-day New Hampshire. Going North in Vermont is the homeland of the Cowasucks, Nulhegans, and the Mississquois, more Abenakis. Continuing North, you are still in Abenaki homeland in the Eastern townships and east of Montreal, with the communities and kinship networks of Saint Francis/Odanak and Wolinak/Becancour. Montreal area itself is homeland to a convergence of Indigenous people: Mohawks, but also many relations of the Seven Nations Confederacy: Abenakis, Nippisings, Algonquins, Hurons, and Onondaga, not to mention Crees, Naskapi, Inuit, Atikamekw, and Innu, who have traveled there for centuries. There are many Indigenous people from other nations living in all of these places now, as there are millions of settlers whose ancestors are Indigenous to other places.

Wabanaki people describe all of Northern New England, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Southeastern Québec as “N’dakinna,” which means “Our land.” Land acknowledgements are neat because, as a person names all of these people and places, you can follow them in your mind’s eye; through that process, one can begin to re-imagine New England as Indigenous homelands. In the process of doing so, I like to acknowledge the non-human residents of places, from birds, fish, animals, amphibians, plants, and fungi, to rivers, rock formations, and all of the sacred that is unseen, to complete the picture in our imaginations. Scholars and contemporary Abenakis agree that the place that became Brattleboro was once called *Wantastegok*, a name that describes this location as being at the place of the mountain the rises above the eastern bank of the river. *Wantastekw*, the Abenaki name for what is popularly called the West River, refers to that river as the one whose mouth at the confluence of the Connecticut faces the mountain. And the Connecticut River is properly called, in Abenaki, the *Kwinetikw* (Holschuh 2019).

Land acknowledgements can, as Matika Wilbur describes, “contribute to the awakening of that agreement.” She is talking about an ancient agreement between people Native to here and their responsibility to care for its lands and waters, this ancient agreement also encompasses the agreements that settlers historically made with Indigenous people here, that were broken. Some of the ways we can heal these historical betrayals is to reframe how we learn about and understand history of this place, and to that effect Indigenous representation matters. It matters because Indigenous erasure has affected the health and lives of Native people for centuries. And it matters because these historical and ongoing betrayals that undergird a society of consumption lead to a spiritual emptiness in the dominant, American society, that effects the wellbeing of all people, including non-human people. This spiritual emptiness is ironically what has historically led settlers to create romantic narratives about Native people, and what was “lost” with their oppression and displacement, or to even try to claim Indigenous heritage, to create a connection with something they feel was “lost.”

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