

The “Vanishing Indian” and the Vanishing Pole: From a Middle Ground to a Logic of Elimination in the European and Global Periphery, 1840–1880

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In 1876, Polish writer Henryk Sienkiewicz traveled across the American West, describing the cross shaped telegraph poles dotting the landscape beside the rail tracks—symbols that had been memorably depicted in John Gast’s painting *American Progress* four years later. Rather than progress, for Sienkiewicz, the telegraph crosses signified death, marking “the graves of the original inhabitants of this land,” the American Indians, who were “being exterminated throughout the United States.”¹ Offered “civilization” in the form of “whiskey, smallpox, and syphilis,” he writes, is it surprising that they “do not yearn for it, but rather fight against it to the death?” Justice in this fight, Sienkiewicz avers, lies “on the side of the Indians.”² After speaking with a “Sioux” man through a translator, Sienkiewicz boasted in a letter to a friend

1. Henryk Sienkiewicz, *Portrait of America: Letters of Henry Sienkiewicz*, ed. Charles Morley (New York, 1959), 55, 59. Works in English analyzing Sienkiewicz’s travel to America include Aleksandra Budrewicz-Beratan, “American Travel Books of Charles Dickens and Henryk Sienkiewicz,” in Grzegorz Moroz, ed., *Metamorphoses of Travel Writing: Across Theories, Genres, Centuries and Literary Traditions* (New York, 2010); Justyna Deszcz, “On Henryk Sienkiewicz’s Native American Experience,” *ATQ: 19th Century American Literature and Culture* 16, no. 1 (March 2002): 43–54; Thomas Napierkowski, “Sienkiewicz in America: 1876 and 1991,” *Polish American Studies* 49, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 45–55; Mieczysław Giergielewicz, *Henryk Sienkiewicz: A Biography* (New York, 1968); Janina W. Hoskins, “The Image of America: In Accounts of Polish Travelers of the 18th and 19th Centuries,” *The Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress* 22, no. 3 (July 1965): 226–45. Following Philip J. Deloria and Neal Salisbury, eds., *A Companion to American Indian History* (Malden, Mass., 2008), 4–5, this article employs “an assortment of words to describe native people,” but prefers “American Indian” or “Native American” when referring to North American Indigenous people and “Aboriginal” when referring to Australian Indigenous people, as recommended by the Native American Journalists Association and the Associated Press. In most cases, however, this article discusses not indigenous people themselves, but rather the problematic appropriation of the idea of them by Polish writers. In this usage, this article employs the term “Indian” in a similar sense to Philip Joseph Deloria in *Playing Indian* (New Haven, 1999) and Vanita Seth in *Europe’s Indians: Producing Racial Difference, 1500–1900* (Durham, 2010). On the history and ethics of naming and indigenous peoples, see James C. Scott, John Tehranian, and Jeremy Mathias, “Government Surnames and Legal Identities,” in Carl Watner and Wendy McElroy, eds., *National Identification Systems: Essays in Opposition* (Jefferson, NC, 2003); and Michael Yellow Bird, “What We Want to Be Called: Indigenous Peoples’ Perspectives on Racial and Ethnic Identity Labels,” *American Indian Quarterly* 23, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 1–21.

2. Sienkiewicz, *Portrait of America*, 63–64.

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in Poland that he had “concluded an eternal alliance with the noble nation of Sioux. . . all my sympathy was on their side.”³

As a Pole, perhaps Sienkiewicz felt he could relate to the experience of a people losing their land to an expanding empire. A series of partitions in the late eighteenth century between Poland’s neighboring empires—Habsburg, Prussian, and Russian—and a series of failed rebellions in 1830, 1846–48, and 1863 had left Poles stateless. In this context, Lenny Ureña Valerio has described the vantage point on colonialism in Polish Prussia as being “rooted in anxieties” provoked by “fears of cultural extinction back home.”⁴ In turn, Janusz Tazbir argues that the American Indian served not just as a “noble savage,” as in other European countries, but as “a steadfast fighter for independence whom Poles should follow,” representing “patriotic aspirations, so vivid during the partitions.”⁵ The motto of the 1830 uprising—“For our freedom and yours”—provided a rhetorical framework for placing the Polish national struggle in the context of freedom movements abroad, and a prominent strand of Polish national identity emphasizes solidarity with oppressed people elsewhere. These internal sympathetic impulses were complemented by externally imposed discourse portraying Poles as a primitive and obsolete people, akin to American Indians: in 1864, Ludwik Powidaj published “Poles and Indians” in the leading periodical of the liberal press, describing the comparison between Poles and Indians as a “favorite topic” among Prussian writers and politicians, who declared Poles to also be “condemned by Providence to complete extinction.”⁶

Of course, the experience of Poles—whose state had been annexed and culture suppressed—was incommensurable with that of Native American peoples—who were subjected to mass scale physical annihilation and forced removal to reservations.⁷ Likewise, Sienkiewicz’s identification with American Indians is partial. Despite Sienkiewicz’s attention to settler violence, his American letters also contain a parallel second narrative in which the violence

3. Letter to Stefania Leo, Henryk Sienkiewicz, *Dzieła: Wydanie Zbiorowe*, ed. Julian Krzyżanowski (Warsaw, 1948–1955) LV:429, quoted in Giergielewicz, 28. It is unclear whether the man refers to himself using the Euro-American term “Sioux,” or if this label is placed on him by Sienkiewicz.

4. Lenny A. Ureña Valerio, *Colonial Fantasies, Imperial Realities: Race Science and the Making of Polishness on the Fringes of the German Empire, 1840–1920* (Athens, OH, 2019).

5. Janusz Tazbir, *Sarmaci i świat* (Krakow, 2001), 286.

6. Ludwik Powidaj, “Polacy i Indianie,” in Stanisław Fita, *Publicystyka okresu pozytywizmu 1860–1900: antologia* (Warsaw, 2002), 30–36. Works addressing this aspect of Prussian discourse on Poland include Kristin Kopp, *Germany’s Wild East: Constructing Poland as Colonial Space* (Ann Arbor, 2012) and Izabela Surynt, “Postcolonial Studies and the ‘Second World’: Twentieth-Century German Nationalist-Colonial Constructs,” *Werkwinkel* (Publication of the Department of Dutch and South African Studies, Adam Mickiewicz University) 3, no. 1 (2008): 27, at <https://hdl.handle.net/10593/8025> (accessed August 9, 2022).

7. The focus of this article is not comparing Polish and Native American experiences of oppression, but rather the conundrums that drawing this analogy provoked in Polish writers. For a case study in the problematics of comparing suffering in the context of comparative genocide studies, see Alan S. Rosenbaum, ed., *Is the Holocaust Unique? Perspectives on Comparative Genocide* (Boulder, 2009), and especially Israel Charny’s “Preface.”

of extermination is replaced by a different process that naturalizes the mass killing and removal of Native Americans. Switching from a description of active violence to the passive voice, Sienkiewicz notes that the Indians "are vanishing with frightening speed"—a "phenomenon" that "has been experienced by many savage people" and "appears to be inevitable."⁸

If Sienkiewicz could draw on Poland's experience of imperial victimhood to identify with Native Americans, his perspective was also informed by Poland's historic domination of non-Polish lands and populations to the east—the so-called "Kresy" and its Belorussian, Lithuanian, and Ukrainian inhabitants.⁹ Sienkiewicz's landmark Trilogy, written in the decade after his travel in the American West, intertwined American and Polish frontier perspectives in describing the land and people to Poland's east in what Elżbieta Ostrowska has described as a distinctively Polish ambivalence, intertwining colonial ambitions with self-doubt rooted in Poland's ambiguous civilizational and imperial status.¹⁰ Sienkiewicz's American short stories demonstrate a similar ambivalence, with American Indians and European settlers alternating in roles as victims and perpetrators of violence.¹¹

The history and national memory of Poland, encompassing the experiences of both an imperial periphery and a metropole, provided a multivalent, volatile position from which to view (or participate in) empire, affording discursive possibilities for identifying with the colonized and colonizer. Sienkiewicz was not the first Pole to bring a schizophrenic view on empire to overseas settler colonialism. As evidence for the "phenomenon" of Native American depopulation that Sienkiewicz describes in his American letters, he references his "esteemed countryman," Paul Edmund Strzelecki, a globetrotting Pole who had surveyed southeast Australia some four decades earlier, recording observations about both geography and the destruction—or rather, perhaps, extinction—of the Aboriginal peoples of Australia, similarly alternating between descriptions of the active violence of settler colonialism and natural inevitability, producing a theory that, Sienkiewicz notes, was deemed a "law" by the English, and held as an "axiom" by anthropologists.¹² Not long before Sienkiewicz's somber musings about telegraph wires, another of his

8. Sienkiewicz, *Portrait of America*, 65.

9. On Poland and Ukraine, see Janusz Korek, ed., *From Sovietology to Postcoloniality: Poland and Ukraine from a Postcolonial Perspective* (Huddinge, Sweden, 2007) and Daniel Beauvois, *Trójką ukraiński* (Lublin, 2016).

10. Elżbieta Ostrowska, "Desiring the Other: The Ambivalent Polish Self in Novel and Film," *Slavic Review* 70, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 503–23. See also Piotr Skurowski, "Dances with Westerns in Poland's Borderlands," *European Journal of American Studies* 13, no. 3 (December 2018).

11. See especially "Sachem" and "Lillian Morris" in Henryk Sienkiewicz, *Lillian Morris and Other Stories*, trans. Jeremiah Curtin (Boston, 1894). For comparison with Sienkiewicz's views on Africa, see Barbara Zwolińska, "Listy z podróży do Ameryki" a "Listy z Afryki" Henryka Sienkiewicza—dwa modele podróży i podróżnika," *Litteraria Copernicana* 3, no. 31 (September 2019): 111–23 and Anna Klobucka, "Desert and Wilderness Revisited: Sienkiewicz's Africa in the Polish National Imagination," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 45, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 243–59.

12. Sienkiewicz, *Portrait of America*, 65. Sienkiewicz would have also been familiar with European American writing on American Indians by James Fenimore Cooper, such as *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826). See Marek Paryż, "The Last of the Black Snakes

countrymen, Sygurd Wiśniowski, was stringing telegraph wires for a British company on the outskirts of the Ottoman empire. On his subsequent travel through Australia, New Zealand, and the US, Wiśniowski wrote an account of the demise of the Maori people, alternating between critiquing colonial violence, obscuring it, and endorsing it, while also becoming a settler himself in the US and the eastern borderlands of the historic Polish Commonwealth.

The idea that American Indians or any indigenous people were “vanishing” was not, of course, unique to these Polish writers. According to this idea, whose proliferation Brian Dippie has traced in US political rhetoric and literature in the first half of the nineteenth century, the American Indian’s “demise reflected no discredit on American institutions or morality. . . but rather, reflected the wishes of the same benevolent Providence who swept clean the shores of Plymouth Bay to make room for His pilgrims years before. One could deplore the fact that the Indian was earmarked for extinction; but one could not alter it.”¹³ An analogous and nearly simultaneous framework, deemed the “Doomed Race Theory” by Russell McGregor, arose to explain the decline of the Aboriginal people of Australia.¹⁴ While each of these histories is unique, the “Vanishing Indian” trope and “Doomed Race Theory” are both examples of what Patrick Brantlinger has identified as “extinction discourses” that posited the inevitable demise of people deemed “savage” by Europeans.¹⁵ As such, each serves as what Patrick Wolfe has described as a “logic of elimination”—an ideology that justifies the removal of indigenous people from their land by rendering the contingency of settlement inevitable, naturalizing and depersonalizing its violence—transforming “destruction” into “extinction.”¹⁶

The development of extinction discourses took place in the context of a shift in the relationship between Europeans and indigenous peoples in the global frontiers of empire. While Richard White has described early encounters between Europeans and American Indians in French North America using the metaphor of a “middle ground”—a “search for accommodation and common meaning” made possible because “Whites could neither dictate to Indians nor ignore them”—this fragile equilibrium was supplanted by the nineteenth century, when White European hegemony reconstructed the Indian “as alien, as exotic, as other.”¹⁷ However, nineteenth century Poles

and the Last of the Mohicans,” *European Journal of American Culture* 31, no. 3 (October 2012): 219–30.

13. Brian W. Dippie, *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U.S. Indian Policy* (Lawrence, KS, 1982), 12.

14. Russell McGregor, *Imagined Destinies: Aboriginal Australians and the Doomed Race Theory, 1880–1939* (Ann Arbor, 2011). Also see Dirk Moses, ed., *Genocide and Settler Society: Frontier Violence and Stolen Indigenous Children in Australian History* (New York, 2012).

15. Patrick Brantlinger, *Dark Vanishings: Discourse on the Extinction of Primitive Races, 1800–1930* (Ithaca, 2003). Harsha Ram’s analysis of the “elegiac mode” of writing on empire in imperial Russia is an interesting point of comparison. See *The Imperial Sublime: A Russian Poetics of Empire* (Madison, 2003).

16. Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (December 2006): 388.

17. Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (New York, 2010). The second edition includes a useful discussion

like Sienkiewicz, Strzelecki, and Wiśniowski viewed empire from a distinctive vantage point, from an occupied state on Europe's periphery. A logic of elimination could reflect onto them, reinforcing justifications for Poland's partitioning: the "Vanishing Indian" could perhaps be the Vanishing Pole. The ambiguous position of Poland with respect to Europe and colonialism afforded Polish travel writers a wide range of possibilities in how to respond to this partial analogy, from imagining a rhetorical space between colonizer and colonized analogous to the middle ground described by White to claiming the rhetorical position of White European colonizers.

These three Polish writers were part of the "voluminous globally contextualized discussion" in travel writing about the American West described by David Wrobel, in which a powerful counternarrative to colonialism existed alongside colonial discourse.¹⁸ While Wrobel suggests that colonial and anti-colonial narratives "probably coexisted not all too uncomfortably" in many people, the analysis of these writers suggests that the tensions of empire pulled hard on those writing from Europe's periphery.¹⁹ In this respect, an examination of these writers, ambiguously located in the civilizational geography of the nineteenth century world, helps restore the multidimensional contours of Europe that Vanita Seth argues have been flattened by postcolonial critique into a "uniform, linear, monolithic metaeurope," even as it demonstrates how deeply their thought was influenced by mainstream European colonial discourse.²⁰ It is this in-between location—described as a periphery to the core and core to the periphery by Emmanuel Wallerstein, enmeshed in a series of nesting hierarchies theorized by Milica Bakić-Hayden—that make eastern Europe so fraught for the application of postcolonial theory, which Ella Shohat notes lacks the directionality that distinguishes "colonized" from "colonizer," disturbingly blurring the boundaries and directionality between victim and perpetrator.²¹

of comparative contexts, as does Philip J. Deloria, "What Is the Middle Ground, Anyway?" *The William and Mary Quarterly* 63, no. 1 (January 2006): 15–22.

18. David M. Wrobel, *Global West, American Frontier: Travel, Empire, and Exceptionalism from Manifest Destiny to the Great Depression* (Albuquerque, 2013), 4–5. For an analogous study on East Asia, see Tomasz Ewertowski, *Images of China in Polish and Serbian Travel Writings (1720–1949)* (Leiden, 2020).

19. Likewise, Josef Conrad (born Józef Korzeniowski) famously described himself as "homo duplex" in a letter to Kazimierz Waliszewski.

20. Seth, *Europe's Indians*, 11.

21. Ella Shohat, *Taboo Memories, Diasporic Voices* (Durham, 2006), 237–38; Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Politics of the World-Economy: The States, the Movements and the Civilizations* (Cambridge, Eng., 1984); and Milica Bakić-Hayden, "Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia," *Slavic Review* 54, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 917–31. An entire subfield has arisen over the last two decades exploring applications of postcolonial theory to Poland and elsewhere in Eurasia. In Poland, *Teksty Drugie* has hosted multiple fora between 2003 and the present, including the 2014 Special Issue English Edition vol. 1 (5): Postcolonial or Postdependence Studies? See also Clare Cavanagh, "Postcolonial Poland," *Common Knowledge* 10, no. 1 (Winter 2004): 82–92; Claudia Snochowska-Gonzalez, "Post-Colonial Poland—On an Unavoidable Misuse," *East European Politics and Societies* 26, no. 4 (August 2012): 708–23; Krzysztof Stępnik and Dariusz Trzeźniowski, eds., *Studia postkolonialne nad kulturą i cywilizacją polską* (Lublin, 2010); and Ewa Mazierska, Lars Lyngsgaard Fjord Kristensen, and Eva Närpea, eds., *Postcolonial Approaches to Eastern*

Poland's in-between location in nineteenth century civilizational hierarchies afforded Sienkiewicz, Strzelecki, and Wiśniowski a distinctive vantage point on colonialism that provided both possibilities and limitations for identification with non-European victims of colonialism.²² Incipient discourse on race as an ostensibly biological, scientific category provided a tool for distinguishing Poles as “Whites” from “non-White” races. While Sunnie Rucker-Chang and Chelsi West Ohuery have noted the persistence of assumptions of east European “racelessness” and racial “exceptionalism” due to the perceived lack of a history of empire, the Polish writers discussed here demonstrate that east Europeans were not only thinking about race, but writing about it, and, in the case of Strzelecki, influencing west European and American racial thought.²³ As Marina Mogilner has suggested, the “globalizing” language of race provided a discourse that could transplant the civilizational hierarchies of Poland to other parts of the world—and vice-versa.²⁴ Even so, the position of Poles in global racial hierarchies was complicated by their status as Slavs, a category ambiguously located between a nation, an ethnicity, and a (potentially inferior) race at the time these authors were writing.²⁵

While these Poles wrote from an in-between space of empire, as Maria Janion has noted, the pull between West and East—and one might add, North

European Cinema: Portraying Neighbours on-Screen (London, 2014). In the Russian empire, see: Vitaly Chernetsky, *Mapping Postcommunist Cultures: Russia and Ukraine in the Context of Globalization* (Montreal, 2007); Alexander Etkind, *Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience* (Cambridge, Eng., 2011); and numerous articles in *Ab Imperio* (see, for instance, Ilya Gerasimov, Sergey Glebov, and Marina Mogilner, “The Postimperial Meets the Postcolonial: Russian Historical Experience and the Postcolonial Moment,” *Ab Imperio* 14, no. 2 [January 2013]: 97–135). In the Baltics, see: Violeta Kelertas, *Baltic Postcolonialism* (Amsterdam, 2006); Epp Annus, *Soviet Postcolonial Studies: A View from the Western Borderlands* (New York, 2017); Epp Annus, “A Postcolonial View on Soviet Era Baltic Cultures” *Journal of Baltic Studies* 47, no. 1 (January 2016). In east/central Europe, see: Korek, *From Sovietology to Postcoloniality* and a forum in the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, volume 48, issue 2 (May 2012), 113–16, reprinted in Dorota Kołodziejczyk and Cristina Şandru, eds., *Postcolonial Perspectives on Postcommunism in Central and Eastern Europe* (New York, 2016). In the Balkans, see: Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (New York, 1997).

22. On the application of civilizational discourse to and by eastern Europe, see Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Palo Alto, 1994) and Elżbieta Kwiecińska, “A Civilizing Relay: The Concept of the ‘Civilizing Mission’ as Cultural Transfer in East-Central Europe, 1815–1919” (Thesis, European University Institute, 2021).

23. Sunnie Rucker-Chang and Chelsi West Ohuery, “A Moment of Reckoning: Transcending Bias, Engaging Race and Racial Formations in Slavic and East European Studies,” *Slavic Review*, Critical Discussion Forum on Race and Bias 80, no. 2 (Summer 2021): 217. The article is part of a special issue of *Slavic Review* addressing race in the field of Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies.

24. Marina Mogilner, “When Race Is a Language and Empire Is a Context,” *Slavic Review*, Critical Discussion Forum on Race and Bias 80, no. 2 (Summer 2021): 208.

25. Recent studies on race and empire in Poland include Ureña Valerio, *Colonial Fantasies, Imperial Realities* and Maciej Górny, “A Racial Triangle: Physical Anthropology and Race Theories between Germans, Jews and Poles,” *European Review of History* 25, no. 3–4 (July 2018): 472–91.

and South—was not equal in Polish intellectual circles.²⁶ Torn between the ability to identify with the victims of colonial violence and the need to affirm their position in the global imperial hierarchy—and, in turn, justify the Polish civilizing mission in the lands to Poland's east—each of the Polish writers discussed here faltered in his effort to imagine a middle ground, which gave way to a logic of elimination. That it did so provides a framework for reconsidering not just Polish and east European history, but also the lure of colonial and racial logic, including for those on the margins, and the difficulty of recreating a middle ground on which European and indigenous people can coexist on level footing.

Paul Edmund Strzelecki and the Humanitarian Underpinnings of Colonialism

"On Aborigines," the seventh chapter of P. E. de Strzelecki's *Physical Description of New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land*, immediately stands out from the rest of the book. Shifting from scientific language to the sentimental "elegiac mode" typical of extinction discourses, Strzelecki observes, "In parts of Austrailasia, there once existed, and in a few instances, there still exists, an indigenous race, which. . . lived long unknown, and is now rapidly passing away." With hints of postcolonial analysis that would emerge more than a century later, Strzelecki critiques Europeans' disregard for the Australian Aboriginal people's "history. . . language, customs, moral, social, and political condition," arguing that European accounts "bear more on what that race [Aboriginal] is to colonists than to mankind."²⁷ It is the "singular presumption of whites" and their "attachment to conventional customs and worldly riches" that leave them able to see Aboriginal people only "as savage, debased, unfortunate, miserable."²⁸ In fact, it is the arrival of Europeans that disrupted their "happy economy," after which "the hearths of the natives, like the wigwams of the American Indian, retreated or disappeared before the torrent of immigration."²⁹

Striving to preserve Aboriginal people in the human record, Strzelecki provided a proto-anthropological account of their beliefs, language (which he compares to Polish), social structures, and a physical description (replete with cranial measurements). In a mixture of compassion and dispassionate scientific language, Strzelecki thus adapted the "Vanishing Indian" narrative that was thriving in rhetoric on the North American West to Australia, where the "Doomed Race Theory" was beginning to take root, even as he critiqued its underlying ethnocentrism and violence. In his efforts to resolve the tension between these two discourses, scientific and humanitarian, he devised an explosive theory on race that became known as "Strzelecki's Law," and

26. Maria Janion, "Polska między Wschodem a Zachodem," *Teksty Drugie: Dociekania Filozoficzno-Literackie* 84, no. 6 (2003): 131–49.

27. Paul Edmund de Strzelecki, *Physical Description of New South Wales and van Diemen's Land* (London, 1845), 333.

28. *Ibid.*, 342.

29. *Ibid.*, 343.

would be invoked around the world to justify colonialism, eugenics, and racial violence.

Born in 1797 in Polish Prussia to a gentry family, Strzelecki spent the first decade of his adult life travelling around Poland and Europe until a chance meeting in Italy led to a career as the plenipotentiary administrating the estate of the prominent Polish noble Sapieha family in the eastern borderlands of historic Poland.³⁰ Around 1830, Strzelecki travelled to western Europe, departing in 1834 for a decade of travel around the world, in North and South America, the Pacific Islands, and finally, spending four years in New Zealand, Australia, and Tasmania before returning to London, becoming a citizen of the British Empire, and a member of the prestigious Royal Geographic Society.

The tormented in-between position Strzelecki's text and its author occupied in the nineteenth century history of empire has resulted in contradictory accounts of his life and works. Waclaw Ślabczyński's extensive 1957 biography places him "among the defenders of colonial peoples of a world standard"—an assessment informed by the high demand for evidence of comradely relationships between the Second and Third worlds, to be sure, but consistent with the observations decades later of pioneering historian of settler violence in Australia P.D. Gardner that Strzelecki was "untypical" of Europeans "in his admiration for the 'Australian native' and his perception of the outstanding traits of their culture."³¹ Yet, Russel McGregor suggests Strzelecki provided "one of the more comprehensive early nineteenth century accounts of the doomed race theory," while Marguerita Stephens argues that "Strzelecki's law was instrumental in relegating [Aboriginal people] to the far side of the line that divided man and not-man" and underwrote decades of scientific justifications for colonialism and racism around the world.³² Likewise, Strzelecki's biographers have characterized him alternately as a brave explorer and cosmopolitan humanitarian, or as a self-serving scoundrel and charlatan.³³

Located somewhere between British metropole, settlers of European descent, and Aboriginal people, Strzelecki came to the Australian colonial project as an outsider and proved unusually capable of identifying its ethical problems. However, his growing implication in that project placed him at the center of the ideological tensions of empire. Viewing Strzelecki simultaneously in the context of his Polish background and the history of colonialism reveals the disturbing paradox of an individual who served as both potent

30. Lech Paszkowski, *Sir Paul Edmund de Strzelecki: Reflections on His Life* (Kew, Australia, 1997).

31. Waclaw Ślabczyński, *Paweł Edmund Strzelecki: Podróże, odkrycia, prace* (Warsaw, 1957) and P. D. Gardner, *Through Foreign Eyes: European Perceptions of the Kurnai Tribe of Gippsland* (Churchill, 1988). See also Waclaw Ślabczyński's collection of documents, *Pisma wybrane* (Warsaw, 1960).

32. McGregor, *Imagined Destinies*, 15; and Marguerita Stephens, *White without Soap: Philanthropy, Caste and Exclusion in Colonial Victoria, 1835–1888: A Political Economy of Race* (Melbourne, 2010), 125, adapted from Stephens' 2003 PhD thesis at the University of Melbourne.

33. Opposing biographical interpretations are provided by Helen Heney, *In a Dark Glass: The Story of Paul Edmond Strzelecki* (Sydney, 1961); and Paszkowski, *Sir Paul Edmund de Strzelecki*.

critic and equally effective agent of settler colonialism—a cause he abetted until the end of his life—whose lasting impact was obfuscating colonial violence as the middle ground he sought gave way to a logic of elimination.

The scattering of Strzelecki's name across the map of Australia and the influx of settlers in the wake of his journey attest to the *Physical Description of New South Wales and van Diemen's Land* as a prime example of the link that Postcolonial Studies posits between empire and knowledge, which renders unfamiliar territory intelligible and useable by the colonizer.³⁴ Strzelecki had support from both local settler elites (most notably George Gipps, Governor of New South Wales) and the British Royal Navy, which he thanked for facilitating his travels and studies. Strzelecki published his book in English, and, eager to ingratiate himself to British authorities (he would become a British citizen on his return), was outspoken about the value of his work for colonization efforts. Yet, despite being representative of colonial literature in many respects, the *Physical Description* is also distinctive. It combines the descriptive language of scientific writing, providing neutral, descriptive accounts of minerals, plants, animals, geographical features, and people he encountered with the conventions of a travelogue (itself a multidimensional genre), including deeply personal moments that frame Strzelecki's experience in Australia through the lens of his identity as a stateless Pole. In the Preface, for instance, he sets himself apart from the "extraordinary race" of Anglo Saxons, which he contrasts with equal parts flattery and sorrow from "other races" that are connected to their soil, "draw from it their sustenance, their power, and their nationality; call it country; love and cherish it as such, and cling to its bosom, though at the cost of freedom, of comfort, of property, and even of life." "Banished" from his homeland, Strzelecki describes his fate and that of Aboriginal people in parallel—to "become but lost wanderers, and soon degenerate."³⁵

It is in the book's account of the destruction—or extinction—of Australia's Aboriginal people that its genres and voices come into conflict, providing two parallel but antagonistic narratives on colonialism. "The approach of the whites," Strzelecki writes, is always followed by "manifold calamities" and the "final annihilation of. . . indigenous races."³⁶ At the word "calamities," an asterisk marks the text's division into two halves. In the main body of the text, using scientific language that resembles the sections of the book about geology, climate, flora, and fauna, Strzelecki develops an ostensibly "scientific" theory of the "decrease" of the Aboriginal population, noting the inadequacy of both non-scientific and conventional explanations based on violence and disease. Instead, Strzelecki shifts the cause of Aboriginal depopulation from the European colonizer to an "invisible. . . malignant ally of the white man"

34. For a revisitation and expansion of Edward Said's foundational 1979 *Orientalism*, see Wael B. Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge* (New York, 2018). The framework of Orientalism has been applied to eastern Europe by Wolff, Todorova, and a growing body of others (see footnote 21). Places named after Strzelecki include the Strzelecki Ranges, Mount Strzelecki, Strzelecki Desert, and Strzelecki State Forest; a list of place names can be found in Paszkowski, Appendix 3, 301.

35. Strzelecki, *Physical Description of New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land*, 3.

36. *Ibid.*, 343–45.

that “carries destruction wherever he advances” and, moreover, is “physiological rather than moral in nature,” and thus outside the realm of individual moral responsibility. Referencing “startling facts,” Strzelecki suggests that the “the union between an aboriginal female and [a] European male”—a “condition” he describes in euphemistic and passive language that skirts the difficult territory of sexual violence and miscegenation as “frequently brought about” in colonial locations—results in “the native female” losing “the power of conception. . . with the male of her own race, retaining only that of procreating with the white men.”³⁷ In other words, Strzelecki theorized that Aboriginal women who have sex with European men permanently lose the ability to reproduce with Aboriginal men, leading to the inevitable decrease (and whitening) of the Aboriginal population. Strzelecki assures he has record of “hundreds of instances” of the phenomenon on his extensive travels not only among Aboriginal people in Australia, but among American Indians in North and Latin America, and the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean and Pacific Islands, making the explanation readily transportable and reusable, facilitating its eventual acquisition of the moniker “Strzelecki’s Law.”

Alongside the main body of the text, however, Strzelecki interjects a series of footnotes that defies his cold scientific explanation with an impassioned critique of empire. Elaborating upon the “calamities” he mentions in the text that befall indigenous people upon the arrival of Whites, Strzelecki provides two harrowing pages of notes describing a slave ship he encountered in Brazil, concluding “my pen falls from my hand and I hide my face in shame and humiliation at. . . the crimes of my fellow men.”³⁸ It is men, not “an invisible ally,” that are guilty here. At mention of the “sympathies of the public” for the “fate of the Australasian,” his footnote critiques the blatant bad faith behind the theft of Aboriginal land, whose rightful owners are “declared by law—or rather, sophistry of law—to be illegitimate possessors of any land that they do not cultivate,” and therefore “looked upon as a sort of brute intruder. . . allowed no more voice than the kangaroos.” Unusually for a European of the time, Strzelecki relativized the Lockean foundation of European land ownership and the civilizing mission, justifying Aboriginal self-defense in the face of colonialism: “Offered only a Christianity stripped of its charity and a civilization that did not recognize his property rights, the Australians understandably rejected both; when his lands were taken, he understandably continued to hunt. . .”³⁹ Strzelecki’s account of the “removal” of Tasmanians to Flinders’ Island after violent encounters with settlers—evidence of the “natural” decline of the indigenous population in the body of the text—instead serves in the notes as an example of “the basest treachery” employed by “the white man. . . to entice the Indians into his snares,” compared to the horrific example of the execution of 110 South American Indians by General Juan Manuel Rosas in Argentina in 1836.⁴⁰ Reaching a starkly different conclusion in his notes than in his ostensibly scientific analysis,

37. *Ibid.*, 346–47.

38. *Ibid.* 344.

39. *Ibid.* 349.

40. *Ibid.*, 351–52.

Strzelecki observes: "the further we examine into the history of this part of the world, the more we shall feel ashamed to meet an Indian, and almost wish that we could appear black in his eyes."⁴¹

The incongruity between the two accounts—dispassionate scientific explanation and vehement humanitarian critique—is so stark that it is difficult to believe they were produced by the same author. In emotional potency and physical presence on the page, the notes overwhelm the body of the text for the final seven pages of the chapter. Confined to the footnotes, however, Strzelecki's cry of outrage at the destruction of Aboriginal people gives way to his "law" naturalizing their extinction.

Strzelecki's "law" was extraordinarily useful as a logic of elimination for settler colonialism. Marguerita Stephens argues, "the idea that the Australian continent was occupied by self-extinguishing natives was a powerful colonial fantasy" that influenced preeminent ethnologist James Cowles Pritchard and American President of the Academy of Natural Sciences, Samuel Morton, who interpreted it as evidence for polygenesis and different species of man. It also convinced Charles Darwin that Australians were "so biologically obsolete that colonists were absolved of moral obligation to attempt even their preservation and whose extinction became naturalized."⁴² It was Strzelecki's quasi-scientific text, and not his critical footnotes that caught the eye of Darwin, who jotted the note, "sterility of one race of mankind with another" in the signed copy Strzelecki had sent him.⁴³ Quoting Strzelecki's account of the "removal" of Tasmania's indigenous people in his own field diary, Darwin handily excised Strzelecki's critique, reversing the blame for instigating the violence from settler "outcasts" to "the blacks."⁴⁴

The tensions that suffuse Strzelecki's book would continue after his return from Australia. In 1847–48, Strzelecki served as Irish Famine Fund Commissioner for the British Relief Agency in the Great Famine of Ireland, a role in which Christine Kinealy has noted he "proved to be an effective champion on behalf of the starving Irish."⁴⁵ Immediately after, he took up work for the Family Colonization Loan Society, dedicated to sending emigrants from Britain to Australia.⁴⁶ While it is tempting to accuse Strzelecki of inconsistency if not hypocrisy, it was his horror at the suffering of the Irish, informed by his perspective as an emigrant from an occupied peripheral country, that compelled him to dedicate his final years to helping Irish families—by facilitating their emigration to Australia. In an interview with a Select Committee in Parliament on the Hunger, Strzelecki emphasized the brutal effects of not

41. *Ibid.*, 354.

42. Stephens, *White Without Soap*, 107, 125. Also see Moses, *Genocide and Settler Society*.

43. Paszkowski, *Sir Paul Edmund de Strzelecki*.

44. For a comparison, see Strzelecki, *Physical Description of New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land*, 350–51; and Charles Darwin, *The Voyage of the Beagle* (New York, 1909), 472.

45. Christine Kinealy, "A Polish Count in County Mayo: Paul de Strzelecki and the Great Famine," in Gerard Moran, ed., *Mayo, History and Society: Interdisciplinary Essays on the History of an Irish County* (Dublin, 2014), 415.

46. Paszkowski, *Sir Paul Edmund de Strzelecki*.

just the famine, but of sustained poverty in Ireland, which he refused to write off as a byproduct of race or religion, comparing the misery of the Irish peasantry to that of other victims of colonialism around the world, and even to the peasantry of Russia, to Parliament's horror.⁴⁷ Yet, Strzelecki found common ground with Parliament in the idea of Irish emigration to "countries more blessed than his native land," a solution to which Strzelecki could personally relate. He endorsed colonialism as the solution to the Irish hunger: "the Irishman improves in two or three years by emigrating to Australia; he acquires habits of industry; he learns to rely upon himself more than he does here."⁴⁸

Strzelecki's sympathy for Aboriginal people, obscured by racist pseudoscience, was finally obliterated by his evidently deeper sympathy for the (White) Irish victims of the Great Famine. While the extinction of the indigenous people of Australia, the Americas, and the Pacific Islands was allegedly inevitable due to a natural biological process, this was evidently not the case for the Irish or Poles. Strzelecki's "law" may have undercut his life's work as a humanitarian, but it eased the tension of his status as both a victim and an agent of empire.

The Vanishing Pole in Prussia and Poland

Strzelecki's conflicted relationship with settler colonialism mirrored the layered imperial discourses at home in the Prussian partition of Poland, dominated from its west even as it was engaged in its own colonial discourses about the lands to its east. When Strzelecki published his *Physical Description* in 1845, Prussian discourse on Poland was shifting from the admiration of the Polish freedom struggle among German liberals in the early Romantic period to what Kristin Kopp has called the "discursive colonization" of Poland in the mid-nineteenth century.⁴⁹ At the 1848 Frankfurt Parliament, the project of German nation building transformed from a mutual enterprise to a zero sum game, with Wilhelm Jordan arguing for the German right to Polish territory by distinguishing illegitimate conquest "by the sword" from legitimate "colonization of the plowshare"—a logic that Julius Ostendorf invoked in demanding the same "right of conquest by the plow" in Poland that had been "exercised by the free North American vis-à-vis the native Indians."⁵⁰

Similar comparisons emerged in German popular literature. Using the civilizational leverage provided by the English pseudonym "William Rogers," burgeoning German writer Gustav Freytag translated the "Vanishing Indian" into the Vanishing Pole, comparing Polish revolutionaries to a "band of wild

47. "Fourth Report for the Select Committee of the House of Lords Appointed to Inquire into the Operation of the Irish Poor Law," *Parliamentary Sessional Papers* 32 (1849), 853–954. Excerpts of the testimony can be found in Paszkowski, *Sir Paul Edmund de Strzelecki and Kinealy*, "A Polish Count in County Mayo."

48. *Ibid.*

49. Kopp, *Germany's Wild East*.

50. Quoted in Kopp, *Germany's Wild East*, 21; originally in Franz Wigard, ed., *Stenographischer Bericht über die Verhandlungen der deutschen constituirenden Nationalversammlung zu Frankfurt am Main* (Frankfurt am Main, 1849).

Indians. . . in the Missouri river valley. . . fit for border skirmishes, novels, and dramas, but unfit for living."⁵¹ Poles crying out for independence, Freytag argued, were "like the poor Indian who, inebriated with fire water, sings his war song. . . We listen to this song, it moves us, but we give no credence to it."⁵² It was this vantage point on Poland that became the setting for Freytag's massively popular and enduring 1855 novel *Soll und Haben* (Debit and Credit), described by Uwe-K. Ketelsen as an "Eastern Colonial" novel.⁵³

Such was the backdrop for Ludwik Powidaj's comparison of Poles to American Indians in *Dziennik Literacki* in 1864. Izabela Surynt and Waclaw Forajter both interpret Powidaj through the postcolonial lens of Homi Bhabha's concept of "mimicry," in which colonized people employ a discourse of the colonizer, undermining it in the process.⁵⁴ Yet, Maciej Janowski has shown that Powidaj's interpretation was part of a larger trend in Polish thought in the wake of the failed insurrection of 1863, combining faith in progress with fear of falling behind and accepting the underlying social Darwinist assumption of a struggle between nations in which self-preservation can be secured only through progress, growth, and civilization.⁵⁵ Rather than mimicry by the colonized, Powidaj can just as easily be read as a European urging his European country to participate in the European civilization of which it is a part. Indeed, the essay relies on the presumed absurdity of its proposition for its effect: "In truth," Powidaj concludes, "we are not as wild as those [Indians]—yet, they stand as an example of what could happen if the process of denationalization continues much longer." As Anna Kolos argues, Powidaj's framework posited Polish expansion into the east as essential to Poland's survival.⁵⁶ At once colonial and anti-colonial, it is a discourse characteristic of a place "in a certain position" (na stanowisku niejakim), as Powidaj put it, somewhere in-between.

Sygdur Wiśniowski and Incommensurable In-betweenness

The depiction of empire in the writing of Sygdur Wiśniowski emerges from an in-between location analogous to that of Strzelecki and Powidaj. In the Preface to his New Zealand adventure novel *Tikera: Queen of Oceania* (1877),

51. Surynt, "Postcolonial Studies and the 'Second World,'" 77, originally in William Rogers [pseud.], "Beobachtungen auf einer Geschäftsreise in das Großherzogthum Posen," *Grenzboten* 3, no. 27 (1848): 39. The passage is also quoted and analyzed in Kopp, *Germany's Wild East*, 21–22.

52. Ibid.

53. Quoted in Surynt, "Postcolonial Studies and the 'Second World,'" 80; originally in "Vier Jungens gehen zur See, vier Jungens werden Landwirt irgendwo im Osten: Die deutsche 'Ostkolonisation' als diskursives Ereignis," in *Literaturgeschichte 18–20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Bernd Balzer and Wojciech Kunicki (Wrocław, 2006), 11–19. See also Kopp, *Germany's Wild East*, 44; Ureña Valerio, *Colonial Fantasies, Imperial Realities*, 45; and Anna Kolos, "'Wildness' as a Metaphor for Self-Definition of the Colonised Subject in the Positivist Period in Poland," *Journal of Education Culture and Society* 2, no. 1 (2011): 81–95.

54. Waclaw Forajter, *Kolonizator skolonizowany: przypadek Sygdura Wiśniowskiego* (Katowice, 2014), 256; and Surynt, "Postcolonial Studies and the 'Second World,'" 81.

55. Maciej Janowski, *Polish Liberal Thought Before 1918* (Budapest, 2004), 87.

56. Kolos, "'Wildness' as a Metaphor," 87.

Wiśniowski struggles to locate Poland with respect to west European colonizer and the colonized Maori people. Claiming to be the first Pole to record his experience in New Zealand, and admitting to “the same kind of sentiment a discoverer probably feels toward the land he has conquered for civilization,” as a Pole, he is also an “unwilling wanderer” who would prefer to stay at home except that he is driven away by “fate.”⁵⁷ This fate potentially places the Poles alongside the Maori, as both were at that moment conspicuously beholden to the “eternal rights” that, Wiśniowski elegizes, “rule the destinies of races and peoples, and make history a register of the birth, growth, and death of nations.” Extending the role of literature in Poland’s national preservation to the Maori, Wiśniowski claims he writes “for two reasons”: to preserve the stories of the Polish narrator of his book and “to celebrate the memory” of the Maori. Yet, the latter, he also suggests, are “dying out like the snow in spring, melting away unresistingly”—an extinction narrative that separates them from Polish freedom fighters, but that is also at odds with the emphatically violent struggle he depicts in the pages of the novel.⁵⁸

Unlike many other European authors, Wiśniowski could draw on his own experience for his writing about New Zealand, having travelled throughout the Pacific after departing his home in Galicia, building telegraph lines in the Ottoman Empire, and watching the lead up to the 1863 uprising from a Polish military academy near Genoa. In 1872, he traveled to the US and bought a farm in Minnesota, where he wrote an account of his travels in Australia along with the novel *Tikera* in the mid-1870s before shifting his focus from the Pacific to settler-Indian relations in the US.⁵⁹ While Wiśniowski consistently distanced his narrator from European colonialism in *Tikera*, he placed himself both rhetorically and literally in the camp of the conqueror in the American West. In 1874, he joined what he described as a “scientific-military” expedition to the Black Hills under Newton Horace Winchell and General George Custer. In his reports published in the Warsaw periodical *Kłosa*, Wiśniowski showed no hint of the identification with American Indians that he had with the Maori, endowing General Custer with the respect “an adventurer feels for an adventurer,” praising him for freeing “women or children imprisoned by the Indians” and employing “forced marches to rebuke recalcitrant tribes.”⁶⁰ In an analysis of Polish traveler accounts of American Indians, Izabella Rusinowa has suggested that Wiśniowski’s writing about the “fate of the Indians” differed from that of other Polish travelers, who typically emphasized the moral superiority of Indians over settlers and critiqued expansionism and conquest.⁶¹ In

57. Sygurd Wiśniowski, *Tikera, or, Children of the Queen of Oceania*, ed. Dennis McEldowney, trans. Jerzy Henryk Podstolski (Auckland, 1972), xxiv.

58. *Ibid.*, xxvi.

59. Biographies can be found in Dennis McEldowney’s editor’s note in the 1972 translation of *Tikera* and Waclaw Forajter, “Mitologia Pogranicza: Australia i Stany Zjednoczone Sygurda Wiśniowskiego,” *Postscriptum Polonistyczne* 1, no. 17 (November 2016): 23–32. Both draw from Sygurd Wiśniowski, *Koronacja króla Wysp Fidżi: oraz inne nowele, obrazy i szkice podróżnicze*, eds. Julian Tuwim and Bolesław Olszewicz (Warsaw, 1953).

60. Sygurd Wiśniowski, “Listy z Czarnych Gór,” *Kłosa* 508 (March 3, 1875): 179.

61. “Indians in the Reports of Polish Travelers in the Second Half of the 19th Century,” in Christian F. Feest, ed., *Indians and Europe: An Interdisciplinary Collection of Essays* (Lincoln, 1999), 297.

fact, it also differs from his own sympathetic depiction of the Maori in *Tikera*. Viciously depicting American Indians as "negligent, treacherous, and utterly corrupt," he justified confiscating their land on the grounds that "the earth belongs to mankind, not to one of its laziest parts, and panthers—four-legged and two-legged—must make way for the progress of civilization."⁶²

Over no more than a few months, Wiśniowski shifted from identifying with the Maori in their noble struggle against a brutal and corrupt colonial system to calling for—and indeed, participating in—the conquest of American Indian land. Seeking to account for Wiśniowski's "ideological inconsistencies," Waclaw Forajter suggests that the author "oscillates between openness to difference and its radical rejection," evincing an "ambivalent attitude" to colonialism.⁶³ While Forajter rounds out Wiśniowski's internal contradictions as byproducts of inconsistencies in his liberal worldviews and his "uncritical faith in progress," analysis of *Tikera* suggests the presence of tensions of empire rooted in his location as a Pole between European colonizer and the non-European colonized.⁶⁴ Inconsistency is not unusual in imperial adventure novels, yet Kirstine Moffat notes a "surprising" tension between the book's "hostile attitude to imperialism" and its articulation of "European anxieties about miscegenation," each of which sets it apart from west European adventure novels about the region.⁶⁵ These tensions are manifest in *Tikera* through the uneasy coexistence of two incommensurable narratives: one that critiques colonialism and seeks to carve out a narrative middle ground shared by the narrator and his Maori companions, and a second that emphasizes the narrator's European civilizational and racial identity, undermining the very middle ground he seeks to create.

Contrary to the description of the Maori peacefully "melting away" in the preface, Wiśniowski sets *Tikera, or Children of the Queen of Oceania* against the backdrop of a brutal war between European colonists and the Maori, in which the Polish narrator is compelled by sympathy and morality to side with the latter. The source of this war, the narrator relates, is a "wicked law" expropriating Maori land that was devised by the "whites" and that "cried aloud to heaven for vengeance."⁶⁶ Lest the analogy to Poland's annexation be lost, the narrator later makes the connection explicit, explaining to a Maori chief, "I recognized the righteousness of your cause," coming from "a nation which would help you if it could. Its heart goes out to all who suffer innocently."⁶⁷ The narrator's identity as a Pole provides him with the unique ability among Europeans to connect to the Maori. When he is drugged in a disreputable tavern, it is the Maori George Sunray (Te Ti) who comes to his rescue—an instance that Moffat suggests inverts the "typically hostile Maori and chivalric European paradigm" of European New Zealand adventure novels.⁶⁸ This

62. "Listy z Czarnych Gór," *Kłosa* 514 (May 6, 1875), 280.

63. Forajter, *Kolonizator Skolonizowany*, 12, 17.

64. *Ibid.*, 269.

65. Kirstine Moffat, "Five Imperial Adventures in the Waikato," in "Writing the Waikato," special issue, *Journal of New Zealand Literature* 29, no. 2 (2011): 37–38.

66. Wiśniowski, *Tikera*, 24.

67. *Ibid.*, 58.

68. Moffat, "Five Imperial Adventures," 57.

meeting places the narrator in debt to Sunray, who asks in return that the narrator “forget” that he has “a light skin” and the Maori “a dark one,” and come to the aid of a Maori in need—a promise that challenges the racial worldview of the narrator and the author alike later in the text.

In turn, the narrator consistently distances himself from colonial powers, whose efforts to keep land from its “rightful owners” he likens to those of the “Austrian frontier guards or the Russian Cossacks”—that is, the forces of powers that partitioned Poland.⁶⁹ Even when he is conscripted, he maintains his sympathy for the Maori, admitting that he is “delighted” that it was the British, not the Maori, who were “exterminated” in a battle.⁷⁰ Germany represents colonial greed, racism, and violence throughout the text through the narrator’s initial companion and eventual antagonist, Charles von Schaeffer, whose implication in the colonization of Poland is evident from the author’s refusal to speak to him in German, “a language which had caused me so much pain and grief at school.”⁷¹ Unlike the narrator, who avoids fighting the Maori out of sympathy for “an unhappy people who are defending their freedom,” von Schaeffer responds, “That kind of thing doesn’t bother me. Anyhow, the Maoris are an inferior race.”⁷² Likewise, he justifies exploiting Maori resources with the remark, “It would be stupid to ask for permission. Metals are indispensable for the advance of civilization. Any tribe which resists the march of civilization and progress must be exterminated”—an interpretation the narrator distances himself from as “Teutonic dogma.”⁷³ Like Strzelecki, then, Wiśniowski proves able to identify and indict the affiliation between progress and colonialism, at least momentarily. The English fare little better than Germans: the prestigious Whitmore family aligns itself with von Schaeffer, forcing the narrator to confront both, in defense of fair play with respect to both oil rights and, following his promise to Sunray, in defense of the mixed-race Maori title character, Tikera, whom the Whitmores disrespect due to their “racial pride.”⁷⁴

The character of Tikera deepens the tension between the narrator’s identification with the Maori and his identity as a European. As Robert Young argues, racial mixture revolves “around an ambivalent axis of desire and aversion,” threatening to undermine the idea of race upon which empire depends, and thus requiring reinforcement from imperial power.⁷⁵ However, Poland’s lack of imperial power and ambiguous location in global civilizational and racial hierarchies made this “ambivalent axis” particularly unstable. As with Sienkiewicz, in Wiśniowski’s text, the opposition with the “other” leads to self-doubt rather than hegemony, resulting in a dizzying back-and-forth as the narrator (and seemingly, the author) vacillates

69. Wiśniowski, *Tikera*, 42.

70. *Ibid.*, 133.

71. *Ibid.*, 11.

72. *Ibid.*, 15.

73. *Ibid.*, 103.

74. *Ibid.*, 262.

75. Robert Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race* (New York, 1995), 19.

between embracing and rejecting Tikera, as well as his own ideals of civilizational and racial hierarchy.⁷⁶

The text's romantic plot is driven by Tikera's quest for a White husband—explained by the narrator in terms of Tikera's "desire to rise above the humiliation in which half-civilized peoples hold their women"—that is, the colonial fantasy memorably formulated by Gayatri Spivak in which "white men are rescuing brown women from brown men."⁷⁷ The narrator explicitly distances himself from most European colonists, however, by rejecting the notion (and with it, Tikera herself) of White men rescuing non-White women through marriage, which he identifies as a hypocritical rationalization of miscegenation by an immoral settler society. In rejecting Tikera, then, the narrator distances himself from European colonists even as he reinforces his identity as a White European by embracing colonialism's underlying racial logic. Yet, after negotiating this tortuous position on Tikera, race, and colonialism, Wiśniowski promptly undermines it, interjecting the voice of an older and wiser narrator who regrets having rejected Tikera after "adversity, travel, and habits of thought had obliterated the Anglo-Saxon prejudices I had adopted."⁷⁸ Unable to choose between distancing the protagonist from Tikera to stake a claim to European racial and civilizational superiority, or to embrace Tikera and his identification with the Maori, Wiśniowski reframes the relationship with Tikera from a romance to the safer paternalistic role of guardian, in which the protagonist defends her not from Brown men, but from racist German and English colonizers.

Beyond demonstrating the tortured position of the Polish narrator (and author) with respect to his location between colonizer and colonized, the failed (or rather, reformulated) relationship between Tikera and the narrator is significant for one further reason. While Forajter posits Strzelecki as the counterexample to Wiśniowski's othering of non-Europeans, in fact, the romantic subplot of *Tikera* operates remarkably similarly to Strzelecki's pseudo-scientific explanation of the decline of the population of Australia.⁷⁹ According to Strzelecki's "law," it is biological differences that cause the sterilization of Australian women after sex with European men. In *Tikera*, the same principle operates at the level of civilization rather than biology. Seeking to account for Tikera's preference for European men, the narrator explains that when non-White women encounter "a civilized community": ". . . envy of her white sisters' happiness wakes in her a strong desire to have a European for a husband. . . . She will strive for privileges which the men of her own race will not grant her, because they cannot." Universalizing the phenomenon into law, the narrator adds that such women are "often found in Oceania, Australia, the Rocky Mountains, or the flamboyant cities of the North American South."⁸⁰

76. Ostrowska, "Desiring the Other."

77. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana, 1988), 292.

78. Wiśniowski, *Tikera*, 145.

79. Waclaw Forajter, "Oślepiająca biel. Problem kolonialnego pożądania w „Dzieciach królowej Oceanii” Sygurda Wiśniowskiego," *Teksty Drugie*, no. 3 (2013): 301–15.

80. Wiśniowski, *Tikera*, 143.

As in Strzelecki's "law," Wiśniowski's explanation for the destruction of the Maori people is at odds with his extensive depiction of violence and exploitation in the text. Shortly after framing the war between the British and the Maori as the result of the confiscation of Maori land, Wiśniowski has a Maori chief naturalize their depopulation as the result of fate: "There are very few of us. . . and we are rapidly disappearing," the Maori chief reports. "The pakeha's wife has four, five, six children. The Maori's wife has none. Atua has cursed us. . ." ⁸¹ Tikera serves as the practical illustration of the mechanism of action behind the mythological explanation. After encountering White men, Tikera is indeed unable to produce offspring with a Maori: she adamantly refuses to pursue a Maori partner, insisting on taking a White lover—even the craven and genocidal von Schaeffer—despite the narrator's best efforts.

The underlying logic of elimination of the "Vanishing Maori" eases the tension between the text's explicitly anticolonial moments and others in which it accepts the civilizational hierarchy underpinning colonialism, and between the narrator's role as a champion and as a critic of racism, allowing Wiśniowski and his narrator to avoid reconciling their contradictory views on colonialism by placing Maori decline in the hands of fate and civilization. Having undermined the middle ground he fantasized about for the narrator and Tikera, Wiśniowski implausibly imports a substitute companion from the French Caribbean—a White creole doctor from Martinique who will take Tikera home to "be part of a society in which she can be proud of the lightness of her complexion, in a place which swarms with Negroes and hideous mulattos." ⁸² It is a fitting solution to a tormented text, imagining a solution to colonialism in another colonialism, creating a safe space for hybridity by providing a lower rung on the ladder of racial hierarchy. The narrator and Tikera finally find a middle ground when they part ways, that is, when the threat of having to occupy it together has passed. At that moment, "A new thread of sympathy joined our hearts. . . an exile recognized an exile." ⁸³ Undeniably and inextricably racist yet attuned to the injustice of racism; obsessed with civilization yet outraged by its hypocrisy, Wiśniowski's perspective is suited to an observer from eastern Europe, from a state obliterated by empire but with its own historic imperial periphery, an "unwilling wanderer" engaged in his own settler colonial project in the US, and later, in Poland's eastern periphery.

The fragility of the thread connecting the Polish and non-European victim of empire is demonstrated by Wiśniowski's abrupt shift in perspective from *Tikera* to his writing on US-American Indian relations in the mid-1870s. With echoes of Gustav Freytag's call to give "no credence" to the beguiling "song" of Polish revolutionaries *qua* Indians, Wiśniowski mocked the tone he had himself taken to the Maori, writing: "Sentimental European sighs over the fate of savages sound beautiful, but we must not forget, for poetic fantasies, that every year millions of hungry brothers come from overseas." ⁸⁴

81. *Ibid.*, 23.

82. *Ibid.*, 289.

83. *Ibid.*, 292

84. "Listy z Czarnych Gór," *Kłosa* 514 (May 6, 1875), 280.

Beyond his transition from an adventure novel, shaped by the sentimentalism of Chateaubriand and Fenimore Cooper, to the purportedly factual and objective rhetorical framework of travel writing and journalism, the shift in Wiśniowski's writing was also significant in the context of the ascendancy of Positivism in Polish thought and culture.⁸⁵ Much as the Positivist press blamed Romanticism for the unrealistic worldview that led to Poland's unsuccessful uprisings, Wiśniowski presented himself as a factual antidote to romantic misinformation about the American Indian that evoked sympathy from Poles and west Europeans alike.

Despite his claim to dispassion, however, Wiśniowski's depiction of Native Americans is deeply emotional, shaded by bitterness. Writing in *Wędrowiec*, he reflected: "I once had a taste for Cooper's novels. . . I was scandalized at the. . . removal of the legal owners and I imagined the Sioux as heroes."⁸⁶ Forajter suggests that Wiśniowski went to the Black Hills in search of the heroic myth of the American Indian; when he failed to find it, he sought to correct the distortion by presenting a mirror image of brutish depravity. Put another way, Wiśniowski took the blame Positivists directed toward Romanticism for Poland's failed uprisings and projected in onto American Indians. The bitterness of disillusioned Romanticism also elucidates Sienkiewicz's writing, most notably, the depiction in "Sachem" of Black Vulture, the "last descendent" of the Black Snake chiefs, who is transformed from a terrifying force of retribution to a clown when he passes around a collection plate for his performance and has a beer and dumplings alongside the descendants of the settlers who killed his ancestors. In turn, the denationalized Sachem, who sings his war song in German, having forgotten his native language, parallels Wiśniowski's denationalized Polish Major Tempski from *Tikera*—a Pole raised in Prussia who has forgotten the Polish language and serves the English forces of empire.

Perhaps most significantly, though, Wiśniowski's perspective shifted from that of a free agent and explorer in New Zealand to a settler in North America when he bought a farm in Minnesota. In *Langenor*, Wiśniowski's adventure story set in the American West, his Polish narrator seeks out a middle ground with a settler rather than an indigenous person—and far more successfully, at that—as the settler, Langenor, turns out to be a Polish American who has suppressed his national identity. Langenor romances Indians, but also massacres them in defense of settlers, with the latter described in sympathetic language as "emigrants" rather than "whites," "colonists," or in indigenous terminology analogous to "pakehas," the Maori word Wiśniowski employed in *Tikera*.⁸⁷ Presented with the opportunity to participate in colonialism as a settler, Wiśniowski gave up his in-between status, abandoned the shaky

85. For analysis of the transatlantic circulation of the writing of François-René de Chateaubriand and James Fenimore Cooper, see Malcolm Bradbury, *Dangerous Pilgrimages: Trans-Atlantic Mythologies and the Novel* (London, 1996) and Gerald Gillespie, "In Search of the Noble Savage: Some Romantic Cases," *Neohelicon* 29, no. 1 (September 2002): 89–95.

86. "Suowie i Amerykanie," *Wędrowiec* 14, no. 358 (1876), 282; and Forajter, *Kolonizator Skolonizowany*, 257.

87. Sygurd Wiśniowski, "Langenor," in Sygurd Wiśniowski, *Ameryka, 100 Years Old: A Globetrotter's View*, trans. Marion Moore Coleman (Cheshire, 1972).

middle ground he had attempted to imagine in New Zealand, and instead took up settler colonialism's logic of elimination.

Wiśniowski's story does not end here, however. In 1884, he returned to eastern Europe, forming an oil drilling company in the southeastern frontier of Austrian Poland, making explicit the colonial subtext underlying Powidaj's imperative to develop Poland to avoid sharing the "fate" of "the Indian." Intertwining colonialism and Positivism, Euro-American and Polish perspectives on empire, he transitioned from his life as a settler in the American "wild West" to become a settler in the Polish "wild East."

Strzelecki, Wiśniowski, and Sienkiewicz each came to the global frontiers of empire from a location somewhere between colonizer and colonized. This position made it possible to imagine a potential rhetorical middle ground that they could share with non-European victims of colonialism. However, this territory was beset by the tension between identifying with the colonized and asserting their own contested status as White Europeans from a state with its own legacy as a regional metropole. Each writer found a way to reconcile this tension through creative strategies that naturalized and legitimized colonialism. While the "Vanishing Indian" trope allowed for sympathy and identification, it was also perfectly compatible with settler violence, serving as what Stephens describes as "a self-reflexive theatre of mourning that cleared the way to a guilt-free future" on indigenous people's land.⁸⁸ Both uses were important for the Polish writers discussed here, as their identities and perspectives were shaped by a vantage point on colonialism that left them torn between aligning themselves with empire and with its victims globally, even as this rhetorical struggle also served to obscure their own involvement, discursive or literal, in Poland's regional civilizing mission to its east.

Ideas of civilizational and racial difference served an important role in reconciling these tensions. Distinguishing conquest "by the sword" from that "by the plow" (to use the terminology of the Frankfurt Congress debate on Poland) was no less useful to Poles than to Prussians, allowing for a critique of other colonialisms while justifying their own. Framing empire in civilizational terms—as progress versus tradition—placed Poles on the side of the colonizer with respect to many non-European locations. Yet, it also forced a reckoning with Poland's peripheral position with respect to western Europe, allowing for moments of critique: even the positivistic Wiśniowski aligned the German antagonist, not his Polish narrator, with uninhibited progress in *Tikera*. Racial discourse further insulated Poles from other victims of empire, providing a veil of whiteness that a humanitarian like Strzelecki could use to blind himself to his own implication in a colonial system that horrified him. Both writers show how race "morphs to accommodate the context in which it exists," as they adapted ideas about civilizational difference from the eastern periphery of Poland to the explicitly racial hierarchy of settler colonialism in Australia and the Americas—and, in the case of Wiśniowski, back to the Polish periphery again.⁸⁹ While both writers

88. Stephens, *White Without Soap*, 12.

89. Rucker-Chang and Ohuero, "A Moment of Reckoning," 220.

initially self-consciously distanced themselves from European colonial racism, each ultimately endorsed it.

Discourses of civilizational and racial difference intersected with those of gender. Strzelecki's "law" operated "through the female alone," as did Wiśniowski's civilizational variation. As Marguerita Stephens and Russel McGregor have shown, rationalizations of Aboriginal decline based on sex showed remarkable longevity. Wiśniowski's use of gender—as Forajter notes, the author frequently depicts women as treacherous—is no less important to his framing of the relationship between Tikera and the narrator than race, informing the tangled mix of European fantasies about colonial women and fears of miscegenation that leaves the narrator struggling to pin down his own location in the hierarchy of race and civilization.

As Wolfe's theory about the territorial underpinnings of logics of elimination would suggest, it was when each author adopted the perspective of a settler colonist that he most thoroughly vanquished his qualms about empire. Wiśniowski's vitriolic writing on American Indians originated from the farm he had purchased in Minnesota. Likewise, Sienkiewicz's travel to America was accompanied by a settler fantasy, as the author sought out a location for a Polish commune. Aleksandra Budrewicz Beratan suggests that Sienkiewicz became Euro-American—and one might add, a settler—when he picked up an axe to build a house in California.⁹⁰

Taking the perspective of a settler was possible outside a context of explicit settler colonialism. While Poland lacked its own state in the nineteenth century, the authors discussed here were involved in the development of the eastern borderlands in the name of Poland, literally or figuratively, at some point in their lives. Contrary to Wolfe's one-dimensional description of settlers as the "rabble" of European society, these travelers and emigrants were engaged in complex and contradictory efforts to grapple with the morality of empire and their role in it. When Strzelecki and Wiśniowski allowed their concern about "hungry brothers" in Europe to undermine sympathy for victims of colonialism elsewhere, they were undoubtedly influenced by racism and Eurocentrism, but they were also struggling with what Jane Lydon has shown is an enduring question in European thought: who deserves empathy in the face of omnipresent suffering, where to draw the boundaries of "fellow feeling" for man, and how to balance sympathy for those abroad with recognizing poverty and suffering at home.⁹¹ The concomitant shift from Romanticism to Positivism provided additional possibilities for writers anxious about their own identity and destiny to employ strategies of distancing, undermining empathy as a discursive alternative to Social Darwinism.

It is noteworthy that some of the most creative strategies for justifying extinction discourses came from a place not so far from a middle ground. These Polish writers could imagine themselves in the position of non-European

90. Budrewicz-Beratan, "American Travel Books," 96. For the impressions of Sienkiewicz's travel companion, Helena Modjeska, see *Memories and Impressions of Helena Modjeska: An Autobiography* (New York, 1910); and Giergielewicz, *Henryk Sienkiewicz*, 25–26.

91. Jane Lydon, *Imperial Emotions: The Politics of Empathy across the British Empire* (Cambridge, Eng., 2020), 31.

victims of colonialism, or in that of their European colonizer (albeit not necessarily to the same degree). This position was unstable and uncomfortable, however, pushing them to reconcile their complex location with respect to empire through discursive strategies that could also be employed to justify colonial violence for themselves and for other agents of empire. Their stories are important lessons, for who is not located between power and oppression in some respect? It is a space that comes with vulnerability, but also agency and obligation in the face of injustice.