

BEYOND BLANK SPACES: FIVE TRACKS TO LATE NINETEENTH-CENTURY BELTANA

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ABSTRACT

From the 1860s, the colonial settlement of Beltana in the northern deserts of South Australia emerged as a transportation hub atop an existing, cosmopolitan center of Aboriginal trade. Viewing a colonial settlement on Kuyani land through a mobilities paradigm, this article examines intersecting settler and Aboriginal trajectories of movement through Beltana, illuminating their complex entanglements. Challenging the imperial myth of emptiness that shaped how Europeans saw the lands they invaded, this article renders visible the multiple imaginative geographies that existed at every colonial settlement. Examining mobility along Kuyani and Wangkangurru tracks alongside British and Australian mobilities, this article makes a methodological argument for writing multiaxial histories of settler colonialism.

Keywords: aboriginal, Australia, dreaming, history, indigenous, place, progress, railway.

On the evening of 2 July 1881, as British settlers awaited the first steam train to Beltana, Aboriginal traders watched from a nearby hill. Established as a sheep run on land of Kuyani people, Beltana was a colonial settlement in the northern deserts of South Australia. Mrs. Lewis, a schoolteacher, was among the settlers who decorated the railway siding with British flags, celebrating its opening with “three cheers for the Queen.”¹ In 1925, at the age of seventy-one, Mrs. Lewis remembered the day as a “milestone in the march of progress,” recalling that “a wonderful spectacle was witnessed by the white people when the train first steamed

*A version of this article was first published as “Beyond Blank Spaces: Five Tracks to Late Nineteenth-Century Beltana,” *Transfers* 5(3), Winter 2015: 68 - 86.

I would like to thank the Coulthard family for sharing some Adnyamathnha history with me at Iga Warta, South Australia, as well as Luise Hercus and Jane Simpson for their suggestions about current place-name research. I thank Altin Gavranovic, Penny Russell and Jemima Mowbray for their comments on earlier versions of this piece and Georgine Clarsen’s support and advice which was critical to the redrafting of this article for publication.

¹ “The Great Northern Railway,” *South Australian Register*, 8 July 1881, 6.

into Beltana.”² She told an Adelaide journalist that “in those days blackfellows came from Central Australia, almost at Parachilna, for red ochre. It was not uncommon to see 200 natives on the trade route.”³ One such group was traveling through the hills - today known as the Flinders Ranges - when the Great Northern railway reached Beltana. As the train approached, Mrs Lewis recalled that, “the blacks climbed to a hill top and crouched down with fear at the sight of the great black engine (or “black moora.”)”⁴

A Wangkangurru man who was sometimes affectionately remembered as “Mathapurda” (old man) by his son Mick McLean, was among a group of ochre traders who first saw a steam train when railway construction reached Beltana. The traders had walked for days from the region now known as the Simpson Desert, following the tracks of beings referred to as “Dreaming creatures” in the field of Aboriginal history.⁵ Known as “mura” in Kuyani and “ularaka” in Wangkangurru, Dreaming creatures travel vast distances creating pathways - or Dreaming tracks - that are central to Aboriginal epistemologies right across Australia. In Wangkangurru lore, two Dingoes chased an Emu to an ochre deposit at Parachilna and Mathapurda was travelling in their tracks when he first saw a steam train. It made such an impression that he composed a song about it. Many decades later in August 1970, Mick McLean at the age of eighty-two performed his father’s Wangkangurru song for linguist Luise Hercus:⁶

Wangkangurru Song

Railway yarilu’ waya’
 Beltana yarilu’ waya’
 Yarilu’ waya’ Beltana yarilu’
 warritha-ru thupu nhatji-rna:
 kali’ngkrima kayiya’
 kali’ngkrima na’ kali’ngkrima yayai’
 wandura warritha
 wandurali’ya

English Translation

The railway tralaa tralaa
 Beltana tralaa tralaa
 tralaa, tralaa, Beltana tralaa
 He could see the smoke from afar:
 Smoke rising
 Smoke rising
 Smoke rising from afar

Arriving along different axes of mobility, the ochre traders on the hill and the settlers at Beltana railway siding watched the train from distinct geographies that coexisted at this colonial settlement. As the growth of large-scale industry in Britain expanded markets for raw materials, pastoral and mining industries threaded Aboriginal geographies into an imperial terrain of capital. From the

² “Pioneer of Far North,” *Mail (Adelaide)*, June 13, 1925, 1.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ William Stanner, *The Dreaming and Other Essays* (Melbourne: Black Ink, 2009), 57.

⁶ Luise Hercus, “Leaving the Simpson Desert,” *Aboriginal History* 9 (1985): 22 - 43: 32.

1850s British émigrés arriving at South Australian deserts began to come in contact with Aboriginal people, ochre and also *mura* - translating these creatures as “good spirit, god or divine being.”⁷ On the other hand, Aboriginal people encountered whitefellows, commodities, and steam trains, incorporating these into songs, poems, and stories. Viewing settler colonialism through a mobilities paradigm, in this article I analyze four key axes of motion, or what I refer to as tracks, that structured mobility through Beltana. Put simply, a track is a story. I propose that tracks from different epistemological traditions circumscribed mobilities through Beltana, forming the arteries of distinct geographies. Focusing on the relationship between discursive tracks and physical motion, this article extends the concept of mobility by examining movement along multiple axes. My aim is to show that tracks not only underpinned the politics of colonial encounter but also profoundly shaped how people saw place and recounted the past.

Rendering visible the numerous tracks that converge at every colonial settlement such as Beltana, this article challenges the myth of emptiness that settlers have repeatedly deployed to seize Aboriginal land. By the late nineteenth century, Australia featured in European spatial imaginations as “a blank space of delightful mystery,” in the words of novelist Joseph Conrad - “a white patch for a boy to dream gloriously over.”⁸ Europeans’ fabrication of Aboriginal lands as “blank space” is usefully understood as an “imaginative geography” to use Edward Said’s phrase.⁹ Myths of emptiness are a recurring trope of European knowledge production about settler colonies and historians have suggested that “settler colonialism was distinctive for its structured imagining away, or cartographic genocide, of Indigenous peoples.”¹⁰

Today the imaginative geography of “blank space” continues to be deployed in societies born of settler colonialism and, in November 2014, Australian prime minister Tony Abbott evoked the myth on the eve of the G20 summit. Addressing British prime minister David Cameron in Sydney, Abbott celebrated “the extraordinary partnership that our two countries have had since the First Fleet sailed into this magnificent harbour,” remarking that “back in 1788 it was nothing but bush.”¹¹ Evoking the view of Eora land through British eyes, Abbott imagined “they must have thought they’d almost come to the moon.”¹² Drawing angry responses from Aboriginal communities, Abbotts comments sparked protests at the G20 summit.

⁷ J. Woods et al., *The Native Tribes of South Australia* (Adelaide: Wigg and Son, 1879), 267.

⁸ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (London: HarperCollins, 2013 [1899]), 7.

⁹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 31 - 72.

¹⁰ Tracy Banivanua-Mar and Penelope Edmonds, *Making Settler Colonial Space* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 3.

¹¹ Tony Abbott, Prime Minister of Australia Media Centre, 17 November 2014.

¹² *Ibid.*

As the heads of the most powerful economies met in Brisbane, protesters burned Australian flags in rejection of the spatial regime born of settler colonialism that continues to erase Aboriginal geographies. As one television reporter lamented the burning of “the symbol of our nation,” activists marched through the streets repeating “always was always will be Aboriginal land.”¹³

A continuous war over place/space belies settler societies and in contrast to totalizing perspectives such as Abbotts, both Mrs. Lewis and Mathapurda’s recollections confirm that colonial settlements were experienced as sites of intersecting tracks. Long predating British colonization, Kuyani ranges comprised a corridor of Aboriginal mobility, trade routes spreading eastward into what is today New South Wales, southern Australian coasts, Central Australia, and as far north as the Indian Ocean.¹⁴ From these various places, giant cats, emus, dingoes, lizards, and people, among other Dreaming creatures, journeyed to an ochre deposit at Parachilna, creating tracks that traders have followed to Kuyani country for generations.¹⁵ Epic Aboriginal narratives describe the travels of Dreaming creatures, and, as historian Dale Kerwin has shown, Dreaming tracks form the arteries of an “Aboriginal economic landscape,” converging upon the Flinders Ranges with particular density.¹⁶ Today these peaks are the country of Adnyamathnha (rock people) - descendants of Kuyani, Bilaluppa, Jadiaura, and Wailpi families, among others, who survived the violence of settler colonialism.

In 1856, the first flock of sheep arrived at Warioota Creek - a major waterway through Kuyani hills. With sheep, a powerful new schema of mobility arrived at Warioota Creek: commodity tracks connecting Aboriginal geographies to London markets and funnelling lucrative profits to colonial firms. From the 1860s, Adelaide-based pastoralist and parliamentarian Thomas Elder began investing in the region, appending Beltana sheep run to the assets of Elder, Smith & Co. (ESCo) - one of the most powerful companies in colonial South Australia. In 1866, Elder established the first Australian camel depot at Beltana, contracting British Indian merchant Bahadur Moradkhan to supply ESCo with both camels and workers. The first camels arrived at Warioota Creek from Karachi, accompanied by thirty-one South Asian cameleers.¹⁷ As camel routes developed outward from Beltana, the growing community of cameleers from across British India and Afghanistan came to be known as the “Afghans” in settler nomenclature.

¹³ Joel Dry, *Nine News* (Brisbane), 16 November 2014.

¹⁴ Isabel McBryde, “Travellers in Storied Landscapes: A Case Study in Exchanges and Heritage,” *Aboriginal History* 24 (2000): 152 - 174: 24.

¹⁵ Philip Jones, “That Special Property,” in *Ochre and Rust*, 349 - 353 (Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 2007).

¹⁶ Dale Kerwin, *Aboriginal Dreaming Paths and Trading Routes* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2010), 102.

¹⁷ Samuel Stuckey’s Diary, Local History Collection, Port Augusta Public Library.

“Beltana” became a brand of wool, and, associated with camel transportation, crowning Elder one of the “kings of the road” in histories of Australian capitalism.¹⁸

The arrival of the Overland Telegraph in 1870 and railway in 1881 consolidated Beltana as a dense conjuncture of tracks. Examining mobility along four tracks, in this article I analyze four geographies that coexisted at Beltana. The analysis contributes to a growing scholarship on the production of colonial spaces. With the dispossession of land at the core of Aboriginal experiences of colonization, histories of the imposition of settler geographies have loomed large in the field of settler-colonial studies.¹⁹ However, with greater foci on the co-production of settler space/Aboriginal absence, writers in this field at times replicate precisely the phenomenon they seek to critique: the erasure of Aboriginal geographies. In contrast, a recent collection edited by Tracy Banivanua-Mar and Penelope Edmonds displaces settlers from the centre of historical narratives by juxtaposing accounts of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal spaces.²⁰ Arguing that autonomous Aboriginal geographies have always challenged settler fantasies of complete possession, Crystal McKinnon’s contribution to the collection illuminates a strategy to dismantle myths of blank space: rendering visible the continued production of Aboriginal geographies.²¹ Building on this work, I propose that the track is a powerful analytic that can bring histories of multiple, clashing imaginative geographies into the same framework.

I begin by investigating the commodity track underpinning the mobility of sheep, examining an 1863 massacre of Aboriginal ochre traders at Beltana. Second, I use linguistic methodologies to examine the word “Beltana” - an English appropriation of the Kuyani place-name “Palthanha.” Locating Palthanha as a site within a Kuyani track, I piece together one artery of Kuyani geography. Third, turning to Mrs. Lewis memories in 1925 about the train in 1881, I suggest that her act of remembering comprised an act of imagined travel along the axis of time. Examining the “march of progress” as track that structured her travel to the colonial past, I highlight the central role that progress tracks played in settler myths of blank space. Finally, examining a Wangkangurru track structuring the movement of ochre, I explore how this axis shaped Wangkangurru imaginative

¹⁸ Michael Pearson and Jane Lennon, *Pastoral Australia* (Collingwood: CSIRO, 2010), 59.

¹⁹ Patrick Wolfe, “Land, Labor, and Difference: Elementary Structures of Race,” *American Historical Review* 106 (2001): 866 - 905; James Belich, *Replenishing the Earth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

²⁰ Banivanua-Mar and Edmonds, *Making Settler Colonial Space*.

²¹ Crystal McKinnon, “Indigenous Music as a Space of Resistance,” in Banivanua-Mar and Edmonds, *Making Settler Colonial Space*, 255 - 272.

travel to the past.

Juxtaposing four distinct tracks facilitating mobility to Kuyani hills, this article can be read as a fifth track enabling imaginative travel from the present moment to late nineteenth-century Beltana. Making a methodological argument for multi-axial histories, I propose that historical practices - writing history, reading history, telling history, remembering the past - can be understood as acts of imagined travel to the past. In contrast to mythmakers leading audiences along imperial tracks, arriving at blank spaces awaiting imperial penetration, my ultimate goal is to imaginatively transport readers to the past with a clear view of the numerous tracks that converged at every site of settler colonialism.

1. COMMODITY TRACKS

The first sheep arrived at Kuyani hills in 1856 shortly after pastoralist John Haines signed Waste Lands of the Crown Lease no. 379. Including a survey of a blank patch of land, this leasehold title imaged Kuyani geography for the first time as private property. Describing property as a “construction of the human mind,” legal theorists have defined it as a particular relationship of human dominion over objects.²² Lease no. 379 classified both land and the sheep on it as property that Haines had dominion over for “pastoral purposes.” Categorizing sheep as “stock” that the lessee had exclusive “rights” to, lease no. 379 classified wild beasts as “ferae naturae” to which Aboriginal people retained “full and free rights.”²³ While this title outlined “that the Lessee shall not...change alter divert or obstruct the use of...roads paths or ways,” it did not acknowledge Aboriginal trade routes as “road paths and ways,” effacing their existence from colonial courts.

The movement of sheep through Kuyani land was inseparable from the motion of “stock” along commodity tracks - a schema of mobility that becomes visible if we follow the first bales of wool exported to Britain after ESCo acquired the Beltana sheep run. First, Thomas Elder transformed his capital from money in Adelaide into commodities pastured on Kuyani hills, paying Haines thirteen shillings and eleven pence per head for 17,705 sheep.²⁴ As ESCo invested more capital on sinking wells and fencing paddocks, sheep grew fat on saltbush while drinking from Kuyani waterholes. Upon investing more ESCo capital into wages and freight, the fat sheep were shorn and the fleece packed into 106 bales of wool-commodity, which were conveyed to Port Augusta and loaded onto the ship *Ormelie* consigned to a

²² John McLaren, A. Buck, and Nancy Wright, Property Rights in the Colonial Imagination and Experience, in *Despotic Dominion*, 1 - 21, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2005), 2 - 3.

²³ State Records of South Australia GRS 3570/1, Box 12, file no. 379 of 1863.

²⁴ Christine Macgregor, *A History of the Beltana Pastoral Company Limited* (Adelaide: Gillingham Printers, 1965), 21.

selling agent.²⁵ Arriving at the London wool exchange, each bale of Beltana grease wool sold for 9d on 27 July 1863, transforming ESCo capital from the commodity form back to money form.²⁶ Sheep featured in ESCo account books as one form that capital took moving along a track transforming money to commodities to money again, only to be transformed back to commodities and so on. The crucial detail was that, viewed over a longer duration of time, as Elder set his money into motion, the total value of capital increased while moving along this commodity track, returning substantial profits to ESCo.

Between 1860 and 1865, as more titles imposed the imaginative geography of private property on Aboriginal geographies, facilitating the increasing mobility of “stock” along commodity tracks, Australian wool exports increased from 59 million lbs. to 108 million lbs.²⁷ Concurrently, ochre continued to move through Aboriginal trading circuits and in 1863 there was a confrontation between two economic systems at one of the few permanent water sources at Beltana. After visiting the ochre deposit at Parachilna, on 16 November 1863, Aboriginal travellers had gathered at a waterhole on Warioota Creek when a white shepherd arrived with 1,300 sheep. The Aboriginal men stopped the sheep from getting to the water, killing three with boomerangs and driving the rest away “saying that [the] water was theirs,”²⁸ and eventually following the shepherds to the station kitchen. Here the manager of Beltana, Captain McKay, horsewhipped one Aboriginal man.²⁹ Tensions escalated over nine days with rumours circulating among settlers that “between 200 and 300 natives [are] coming down.”³⁰ On 27 November 1863 settlers with firearms confronted the traders at Warioota Creek, a witness later testifying that “Captain McKay got off his horse to fire at the natives, as they were all about the creek.”³¹

Settler presses reported the deaths of only the three people whose corpses remained at Warioota Creek when police arrived, omitting the “forty or fifty others [who] died of their wounds before they reached their own territory,” according to Kuyani records.³² In defense of the regime of private property, on 23 December 1863 the jury of eight settlers returned the verdict of “justifiable homicide,” unanimously

²⁵ “British Shipping,” *South Australian Weekly Chronicle*, 18 July 1863, 2.

²⁶ “London Wool Sales,” *South Australian Register*, 9 October 1863, 4.

²⁷ Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 579.

²⁸ Cited in Jones, “That Special Property,” 363.

²⁹ “Letter from Wenowie,” *Argus (Melbourne)*, 16 December 1863, 6.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

³¹ “Inquest on Natives Shot in the Far North,” *South Australian Register*, 26 January 1864, 6.

³² T. Masey, “The Red-Ochre Caves of the Blacks,” *South Australian Register*, 10 June 1882, 6.

ruling that the killers were “quite justified in firing and shooting at the natives.”³³ McKay urged Elder to “warn the Government to order up a sufficient force to protect the settlers if not, they will be shot down like dogs, as the settlers must do so in defence of their lives and property.”³⁴ Between 1863 and 1880, police power increased across the colony as the returns on wool exported nearly tripled from £715,935 to £2,009,171.³⁵ The result was that settlers continued to kill traders operating within the logic of Aboriginal economic systems and the shooting at Warioota Creek is one of a number of massacres along ochre routes characterized by unresolved discrepancies between settler and Aboriginal records.³⁶

While waging war on Aboriginal economies in conflict with commodity tracks, colonists implemented a rations system to incorporate Aboriginal labor into the capitalist economy. By 1867 Beltana was operating as a ration depot, issuing tobacco, blankets, and flour as “compensation” for the dispossession of land. As historian Robert Foster has argued, far from “compensation,” in practice, pastoralists used government-supplied commodities as substitutes for wages for Aboriginal labor.³⁷ While commodity tracks underpinned the way pastoralists saw both animals and land, and shaped how settlers arbitrated between legal and illegal human acts in colonial courts, Kuyani people continued to see creatures embedded in distinctly different tracks. Next I piece together a track that continued to structure Kuyani spatial perspectives even as Aboriginal labor became incorporated into the pastoral economy.

2. A KUYANI TRACK

In deserts defined by the scarcity of water, both Aboriginal and settler tracks converged on Warioota Creek and “Beltana” was an appropriation of the Kuyani place-name “Palthanha” - a site along Warioota Creek. As linguists working with Aboriginal language speakers have shown, place-names such as *Palthanha* are often held tightly in sequence in Aboriginal narratives and situating place-names within tracks can reveal “a way of looking at the land.”³⁸ Seeking spatial perspectives

³³ “Inquest on Natives Shot in the Far North,” 6.

³⁴ “Fatal Affray with the Blacks in the North,” *Argus*, 16 December 1863, 6.

³⁵ “Annual Retrospect,” *South Australian Register*, 20 January 1864, 2; “The Years Retrospect,” *South Australian Advertiser*, 1 January 1881, 6.

³⁶ Mick McLean, “The End of the Mindiri People,” in *This Is What Happened*, trans. Luise Hercus, ed. Peter Sutton and Luise Hercus, 182 - 192 (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1971).

³⁷ Robert Foster, “Coexistence and Colonisation on Pastoral Leaseholds in South Australia, 1851 - 99,” in *Despotic Dominion*, ed. John McLaren, A. Buck, and Nancy Wright, 248 - 265, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2005), 255.

³⁸ Luise Hercus, Flavia Hodges, and Jane Simpson, *The Land Is a Map* (Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2002), 10; Dorothy Tunbridge, “Aboriginal Place Names,” *Australian Aboriginal Studies* 2 (1987): 213.

effaced by settler maps, in this section I use linguistic methodologies to piece together a Kuyani track to *Palthanha*.

Traveling Dreaming creatures not only leave tracks but also create the landmarks of Aboriginal geographies. Many, but not all, Aboriginal place-names refer to events signposting the travels of a Dreaming creature. Linguists Jane Simpson and Luise Hercus have illustrated the relationship between Dreaming tracks and place-names using an example from Warumungu, a language spoken today around Tennant Creek in the Northern Territory: “Warumungu ancestral women go to the place *Wittin* and leave a coolamon. That is visible now as a waterhole. *Wittin* means ‘coolamon’ in Warumungu. They go east to another place, *Manaji*, where they dig bush potatoes. *Manaji* means ‘bush potato’ in Warumungu.”³⁹ In this example featuring “Warumungu ancestral women” as Dreaming creatures, the place-names *Wittin* and *Manaji* reference the creation stories of the sites and belong in a Dreaming track that unfolds in the strict order that the women travel in the story, hinting at the sequence of the places within Warumungu routes of mobility.

While linguists suggest that Kuyani *Paltha-nha* can be literally approximated to English “cloak-place,” place-name research has yet to shed light on the physical location of *Palthanha* or the Dreaming track associated with it.⁴⁰ However, from the 1880s settlers began to propose etymologies for “Beltana” citing Kuyani speakers, and, as linguists insist, many differing etymologies penned by settlers aid rather than obscure attempts to reconstruct the range of usages that an Aboriginal-language word had. Nathaniel Phillipson, the manager of Beltana, was the first colonist to record an etymology for *Palthanha*, writing that Kuyani workers informed him “BELT meant running and ANA water.”⁴¹ While not literally correct, this etymology has proved enduring, and draws attention to Warioota Creek as a key to the Kuyani meaning.

With the rise of the Beltana Pastoral Company, Aboriginal families continued to live near, hunt along, and tell stories about Warioota Creek. Docie Pondi, her son Billy, and his wife Rosie were one Kuyani family who spent their lives in the Beltana area. As one former Beltana resident wrote to an Adelaide newspaper in 1930, “I played with the blacks” as “a tiny girl” and “Billy Pondi...was a constant visitor to our home...Old Rosie did the washing for my mother.”⁴² As interdependence

³⁹ Hercus, Hodges, and Simpson, *The Land Is a Map*, 12.

⁴⁰ Personal Communication with Luise Hercus and Jane Simpson, 7 April 2010; Bernhard Schebeck, “Some Remarks on Placenames in the Flinders,” in Hercus, Hodges, and Simpson, *The Land Is a Map*, 146.

⁴¹ Macgregor, *A History of the Beltana Pastoral Company Limited*, 19.

⁴² “Played with the Blacks,” *Register News-Pictorial (Adelaide)*, 24 September 1930, 6.

increased between Aboriginal labor and pastoralists, Kuyani people often schooled settlers in Dreaming lore and one letter published in the *Register* in 1924 outlined a “legend” of the “Coollannie tribe” associated with the name “Beltana.”⁴³ Written under the pseudonym “Coollannie,” he - or was it she? - wrote, “I was born at Beltana Station...in the year 1884,” and reminisced that “I knew all the old-time blacks, and from them I gathered the following story.”

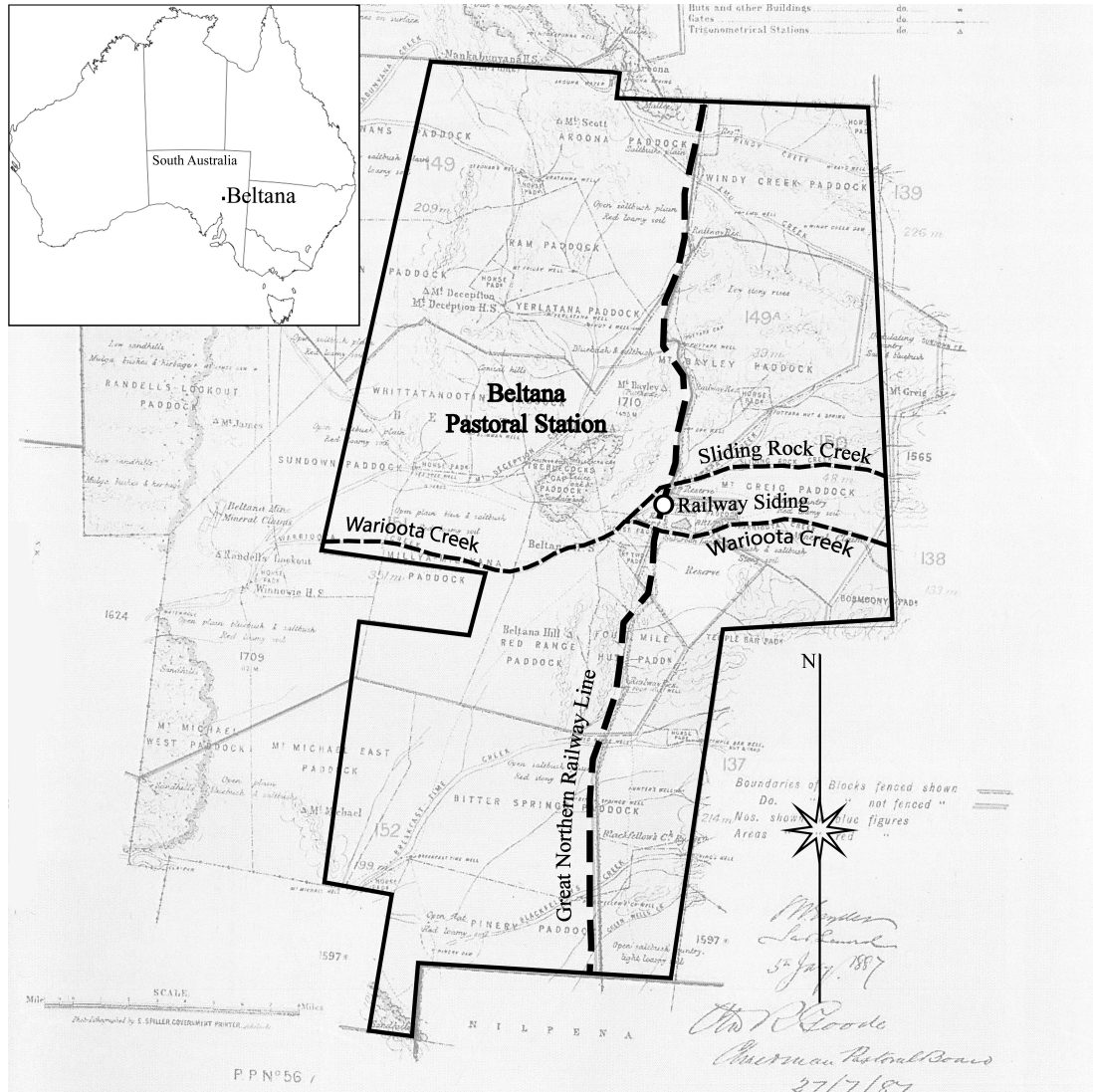


FIGURE 1. Tracks running through Beltana Pastoral Property

⁴³ “Letter from Coollannie,” *Register* (Adelaide), 11 August 1924, 7.

She or he wrote “Beltana Station stands on the south side of the Warioota Creek, on a high hill that slopes down to the creek.” Recounting that Warioota and Sliding Rock creeks “junction...in front of the station,” the letter continued, “just below the junction there arises a steep bluff, which seems to spring straight out of the creeks bed.” On most days both creeks were dry, stony paths. After the sudden thunderstorms that assault Kuyani hills, both rise to rush westward toward Lake Torrens - the western boundary of Beltana station. Where the creeks meet, Coollannie wrote that “in high floodtime the water divides, and a large portion of it swirls around this bluff.” Remembering the “commotion” at the junction, Coollannie described that “the swift straight current of the Warioota forces most of the waters of the Sliding Rock Creek to the north of the bluff, and they rejoin at the old Afghan camp” - the depot where South Asian cameleers camped throughout this settler’s childhood.

After detailing ecological motion along these creeks, Coollannie proposed that “‘Ana’ means water in the blacks’ language and ‘Belta’ means crossing.” Although not literally correct, Coollannie was not alone in claiming that “Beltana” was a place associated with “crossing-water.” In the 1920s, an elderly Kuyani man informed W. Reid, the manager of Beltana, that the name meant “crossing of the waters.”⁴⁴ When Phillipson, Reid, and Coollannie’s conversations with Kuyani people are all read together as suggested by linguists, *Palthanha* emerges as the name for the junction of the two creeks.

The letter continued that “the Coollannie tribe had a legend that the Warioota and Sliding Rock Creeks quarrelled when they met.” When Kuyani people told this story, it is likely it was Dreaming creatures traveling along the creeks who “quarrelled.” As Adnyamathnha oral archives confirm today, the range of encounters between Dreaming creatures is extremely vast. Dingoes ripped an emu open to create an ochre pit. One lizard with two husbands had a jealous fight with another lizard with ten husbands. A kangaroo coming across a slumbering woman tucked her into his pouch and bounded away.⁴⁵ These encounters nevertheless all left their mark on places. Coollannie’s account of the “legend” of *Palthanha* continued that, on encounter, “the Warioota lay down while the Sliding Rock waters passed over them, and then, after going around the bluff, the waters became friends again, and the[y] followed the creeks’ natural course.” Almost from the moment that Europeans encountered Aboriginal people, they began to pen accounts of Dreaming

⁴⁴ Macgregor, *A History of the Beltana Pastoral Company Limited*, 19.

⁴⁵ Dorothy Tunbridge, *Flinders Ranges Dreaming* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1988), 60, 76.

creatures and within the context of this literature, Coollannie's letter is recognizable as one settler's memory of a Kuyani track, albeit with some gaps.⁴⁶

Significantly, Coollannie noted "the strange part...is that in high floods most of the Warioota's waters pass to the north of this bluff, while the Sliding Rock's waters pass to the south."⁴⁷ While "Paltha-nha" did not literally translate to "crossing-water," on rare occasions there was literally a crossing of waters at *Palthanha* as the two creeks reached equilibrium. While the letter contains gaps where Dreaming creatures usually feature in Aboriginal stories, that Coollannie replaced them with "waters" hints that Kuyani storytellers told the tale *as if* mapping the motion of "floodtime" waters. Coollannie's letter suggests that the Kuyani story of *Palthanha*, contained dense details mapping ecological mobility and emerges as an axis along which Kuyani people viewed place.

Kuyani tracks continued to structure Aboriginal spatial perspectives alongside the rise of pastoralism as Aboriginal peoples ability to *see* creatures' tracks - Dreaming and otherwise - became a valuable resource for pastoralists. Tracking dingoes and other animals threatening sheep became a crucial part of Kuyani labor, and the Pondi family became infamous around Beltana for their tracking skills. Billy Pondi even extended an invitation to Warioota Creek in 1929, challenging white hunters who claimed superiority to Aboriginal trackers to "come along and track a wild dog with us over the stones."⁴⁸ Whereas the story of *Palthanha* fell out of circulation in settler records, it continues to be told by Adnyamathnha people today. While commodity tracks did not necessarily erase Aboriginal tracks, next I examine how settlers deployed another track to imagine away Aboriginal presence as they marched toward a destination point of "White Australia."

3. THE MARCH OF PROGRESS

From the moment it arrived at Beltana in 1881, the steam train was understood by settlers as facilitating a break from the past, radically speeding up entities to their destination points. At opening celebrations colonists reminisced about "former days," when deliveries to Port Augusta took "three weeks," anticipating that "the twelve hours...necessary in future...would give great impetus to the prosperity of Beltana."⁴⁹ In 1925, the Adelaide newspaper *Mail* published one ageing settler's memories of that day. Consistent with European representations of steam trains as a symbol of "progress," the reporter cataloged Mrs. Lewis's account of the first

⁴⁶ Michael Organ, "Australian Aboriginal Dreaming Stories: A Chronological Bibliography of Published Works 1789 - 1991," *Aboriginal History* 18 (1994): 123 - 144.

⁴⁷ "Letter from Coollannie."

⁴⁸ "Billy Pondi's Challenge," *Register News-Pictorial*, 29 November 1929, 6.

⁴⁹ "The Great Northern Railway."

train as one of a number of “milestones in the march of progress.”⁵⁰ Mrs. Lewis’s act of remembering is usefully understood as an act of imaginative mobility along the axis of time from 1925 to 1881, and here I examine how a progress track shaped her travel. As Lorenzo Veracini has written, “anticipatory geographies” of emptiness buttressed settler colonialism, and progress tracks played a central role in settlers’ articulations of futures emptied of Aboriginal people.⁵¹

First articulated by Immanuel Kant, “progress” is a story of mobility through time. European philosophers writing during the industrial and political revolutions of the late eighteenth century theorized “progress” as a timeline of collective human mobility toward a better future, diverging from Christian timelines of approaching apocalypse.⁵² While progress tracks arrived at Kuyani hills with explorer John Edward Eyre in 1840, from the 1850s British colonists increasingly began looking at sites like *Palthanha* and imagining the potential for “progress” toward prosperous settler futures.⁵³ Describing “progress” as “the experience of a new time condensed into a word,”⁵⁴ German historian Reinhart Koselleck has argued that “progress became a modern concept when it shed or forgot its natural background meaning of stepping through space.”⁵⁵ It is precisely this faded figurative meaning I evoke here to show that “progress” comprised a schema of mobility that settlers deployed to erase non-white tracks at Beltana.

In addition to the arrival of the steam train, the reporter from the *Mail* cited a number of “milestones” in the “march of progress,” including “the first arrival of camels from Afghanistan; the opening up of much unoccupied land, and many gold rushes and copper booms.”⁵⁶ Identifying events speeding the mobility of commodities, these milestones suggest that “the march of progress” was a track closely entangled with commodity tracks. Intensifying capitalism across the Australian colonies was accompanied by growing Asian populations, and, by the late nineteenth century, Beltana was a node of chain migration for South Asians working in the camel industry. With the onset of economic depression in the 1890s, racially exclusive movements gained momentum as settlers sought to exclude non-white people from the Australian colonies. Progress narratives articulated by nationalists envisioned a future “White Australia,” culminating in the federation of six British colonies in 1901 into the Australian nation. The new Commonwealth Parliament

⁵⁰ “Pioneer of Far North,” 1.

⁵¹ Lorenzo Veracini, “The Imagined Geographies of Settler Colonialism,” in Banivanua-Mar and Edmonds, *Making Settler Colonial Space*, 179.

⁵² Reinhart Koselleck, “‘Progress’ and ‘Decline’”, in *The Practice of Conceptual History*, trans. Todd Presner (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 218 - 236.

⁵³ “Water in the North,” *South Australian Register*, 7 November 1856, 2.

⁵⁴ Koselleck, “‘Progress’ and ‘Decline,’” 225.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 221.

⁵⁶ “Pioneer of Far North,” 1.

enacted legislation today known as the “White Australia policy,” controlling the entry, employment, and mobility of non-white people. Published twenty-four years after colonials such as Mrs. Lewis became nationals of “White Australia,” the article in the *Mail* (re)produced the omissions and contradictions that buttressed the national spatial regime.

Whereas the “arrival of camels” featured as a milestone of progress, omitting South Asian cameleers from an account of nineteenth-century Beltana, where they had a particularly large presence, the article in the *Mail* erased one circuit of non-white mobility from the past it conjured. The erasure of Aboriginal tracks was more complex. First, imaginatively transporting herself back in time to the 1881 arrival of the train, Mrs. Lewis remembered the “hundreds of blacks, who lived about Beltana,”⁵⁷ and the regular arrival of “200 natives...at a time” for ochre. Yet immediately afterward, she recounted the “opening up of much *unoccupied* land.”⁵⁸ How is it possible that so many Aboriginal people were present around Beltana and yet the land was unoccupied? Precisely what constituted the occupation of land by a people according to settlers?

Intra-European debates about what constituted human “occupation” of a place, have long been central to changing notions of property, empire, and nation - forms of dominion defined as legal in colonizers’ legal traditions.⁵⁹ Historian Andrew Fitzmaurice writes that with the aim of dispossessing Indigenous peoples from their land, English colonizers in seventeenth-century North America first “used the law of occupation to invent the perception that the lands they were appropriating were void of exploitation and ownership.”⁶⁰ Redefined exclusively by settler colonists as a relationship to land that increased its capital value, “occupation” according to settlers amounted to mobility *only* along commodity tracks. This exclusive redefinition of “occupation” constitutes a key event in the invention of myths of emptiness that belie settler colonialism

The Act of British Parliament in 1834 declaring British dominion over the colony of South Australia defined Aboriginal geographies as “waste and unoccupied lands,”⁶¹ and accordingly Eyre described the country he saw peopled by Aboriginal inhabitants as “unoccupied,” until it was “occupied by stations.”⁶² The article in the

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid. (Emphasis added).

⁵⁹ Andrew Fitzmaurice, *Sovereignty, Property and Empire 1500 - 2000* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

⁶⁰ Ibid., 1 - 33.

⁶¹ South Australian Act or Foundation Act of 1834, 15 August 1834.

⁶² Edward John Eyre, *Journals of Expeditions of Discovery into Central Australia*, vol. 1, 25 June 1840 (Project Gutenberg, 2004).

Mail in 1925 echoed these earlier declarations and did not actually deny Aboriginal presence at colonial Beltana. Rather, categorizing Aboriginal relationships to place as falling outside the definition of “occupation,” the article in the *Mail* draws attention to a key strategy settlers used to legitimize the theft of Aboriginal land.

Second, moving forward through time from the moment of the arrival of the railway, the article portrayed a future emptied of Aboriginal people. The journalist wrote that the hundreds of Aboriginal people around Beltana “died out quickly after the train came,”⁶³ recruiting the train as an instrument realizing settler fantasies about the erasure of Aboriginal people. Just as colonists at Beltana in 1881 had imagined the steam train would accelerate the arrival of goods at their destination point, Mrs. Lewis perceived that the steam train accelerated the arrival of settlers at the destination point of “White Australia.”

Whether it was the reporter or Mrs. Lewis who announced the end of the “Cooan-
nie tribe” in 1925, it was not true. Undoubtedly the 1920s marked a period of immense upheaval for Aboriginal people in the Flinders Ranges, with many communities being forced to move from their lands.⁶⁴ While it is important not to downplay the disease, upheaval, and violence caused by the ongoing processes of settler dominion, Kuyani people by no means “died out.”⁶⁵ Not even all press accounts effaced Aboriginal presence from the Beltana region - one paper in 1929 published a photograph of four generations of a Kuyani family, from Docie Pondi who had witnessed the arrival of the “first whites,” to her great-grandchildren, a striking statement of Kuyani resilience.⁶⁶ In addition, a corporate history of Beltana written in 1965 notes that Aboriginal people’s presence “has continued over the years until the present when they occupy the abandoned homes in the township,”⁶⁷ confirming that Aboriginal relationships to the area both predated and outlasted white settlement.

Imaginatively transporting herself to colonial Beltana from 1925, Mrs. Lewis could see Aboriginal traders along ochre routes and was also aware of Dreaming creatures (*mura*). That she equated the “black engine” of the steam train with “black moora” suggests she used whatever she grasped about Dreaming creatures to imagine how people on the hill might have viewed the scene. However, narrating forward mobility through time from 1881, she disciplined her memories into a progress track destined for “White Australia.” Relegating Aboriginal people and “moora” to the past and effacing non-white tracks from an imagined future, this newspaper article

⁶³ “Pioneer of Far North,” 1.

⁶⁴ Peggy Brock, *Yura and Udnyu* (Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 1985), 49 - 50.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 13 - 17.

⁶⁶ “Billy Pondi’s Challenge,” 6.

⁶⁷ Macgregor, *A History of the Beltana Pastoral Company Limited*, 29.

highlights how settlers used progress tracks to reconcile contradictions at colonial settlements between the blank spaces depicted on imperial maps with their lived experience of peopled Aboriginal lands. Whereas according to settlers the train accelerated their march of progress to “White Australia,” next I examine a track structuring Wangkangurru memories of the train.

4. A WANGKANGURRU TRACK

Two dingoes chased an emu through deserts crisscrossed by creaturely tracks. According to Wangkangurru storytellers, each time the emu changed direction, each place it stopped to drink, each close escape, all created landmarks that Wangkangurru travelers followed for generations to Kuyani peaks. When Britons began colonizing land along the emu’s escape route, Aboriginal storytellers repeatedly told them the saga of its getaway.⁶⁸ The numerous accounts of the story published in English confirm that it was amid Kuyani peaks that the two vicious dingoes eventually caught the emu and ripped it open. There its blood gushed forth, staining the surrounding country and solidifying in a cave near Parachilna.

As colonists were translating names such as *Palthanha*, they also began to describe the congealed blood of Dreaming creatures as “red-ochre.”⁶⁹ Mick McLean’s father, who I refer to as “Mathapurda” in this article, was on a journey to Parachilna for ochre following the track of the Dreaming emu to Kuyani hills, when he witnessed the arrival of the steam train at Beltana. As historian Dale Kerwin has argued, ochre routes comprised conduits of innovation in Aboriginal geographies as new goods, technologies, and ideas returned from distant lands with ochre traders.⁷⁰ Returning home to Wangkangurru deserts, as Mathapurda sang about the “railway,” the steam train took form in the imagination of his son, and in 1970 Mick McLean recounted to linguist Luise Hercus, “oh how I wanted to see the fire of a train! I wanted to see the smoke of that fire!”⁷¹ While armed settlers defending private property wreaked havoc along ochre routes, in this section I show that colonial common ways - camel routes interlocking with the railway line - had different implications for Aboriginal tracks.

Employed in both the camel and railway industries from the earliest days, Aboriginal workers played a key role in ensuring the continued movement of ochre to distant deserts. Ben Murray, son of a Baluchi cameleer and an Aboriginal mother, recounted that in the 1910s, with mail he used to deliver ochre to Killalpaninna on camelback - avoiding detection by missionaries by “cut[ting] the corner of the

⁶⁸ Masey, “The Red-Ochre Caves of the Blacks,” 6.

⁶⁹ “Water in the North,” 2.

⁷⁰ Kerwin, *Aboriginal Dreaming Paths and Trading Routes*, 102.

⁷¹ Hercus, “Leaving the Simpson Desert,” 32.

flour-bag” and disguising ochre as a commodity.⁷² Ochre also began moving along the railway and Ben Murray recalled that the train guard allowed ochre traders “to travel in an empty truck concealed under a tarpaulin.”⁷³ The relationships that Aboriginal workers formed with railway staff and South Asian cameleers facilitated Aboriginal trade along these common ways where ochre traders were less vulnerable to the terror of armed settlers. As Wangkatyaka man Jimmy Russell recalled, by 1904 ochre traders “walked to that hill and they came back on the train.”⁷⁴

At times traveling the same physical routes as commodities, the congealed emu blood nevertheless remained embedded in a track distinct from commodity tracks. When Takaweejee, the head stockman at Cowarie station told the Wangkangurru story in the 1920s, it began with two creatures jumping out of the earth: “Emu jump up. Dog him live in hole. Chase’em emu. Emu run. Dog run.”⁷⁵ The animals “Pass’im Killalpaninna. Pass’im Dulkaninna. Pass’im Apawandinna,” stringing together Aboriginal communities connected by camel routes at this time. “All time Emu run. Dog run,” and Takaweejee narrated “Pass’im Farina. Pass’im Beltana,” mapping the emu’s escape along the railway line. He continued, “Emu him run up big hills. Dog him catch’em emu. Kill’em. Blood him jump out. Ochre grow. Lot good ochre.” Even as settlers were fantasizing that the train had erased Aboriginal people from the Beltana region, Aboriginal traders were moving goods on the train, while incorporating the railway into a Wangkangurru track.

Just as a progress track disciplined Mrs. Lewis’s memories of the first train, a close look at Mick McLean’s performance of Mathapurda’s railway song suggests that Wangkangurru imaginative travel to past Beltana was shaped by the Dreaming track featuring the fleeing emu. Before singing his father’s song, Mick McLean reminisced about *Palkuru* in Wangkangurru deserts where he camped as a boy “time and time again.”⁷⁶ He narrated in English “I was a boy then [Mathapurda] leave me along Palkuru. He came up for that red ochre over there at Parachilna.” Switching to Wangkangurru he reiterated that Mathapurda “went off to Parachilna leaving me behind as a small boy. We went on staying in our camp [at Palkuru].” Returning to English, Mick McLean said, “The end of that railway was along Beltana in that time *waru yarndi* (long, long ago),” and began to sing his father’s

⁷² Peter Austin, Luise Hercus, and Philip Jones, “Ben Murray (Parlku-Nguyu-Thangknyiwarna),” *Aboriginal History* 12 (1988): 144.

⁷³ Jones, “That Special Property,” 370.

⁷⁴ Luise Hercus, “Singing and Talking about Red Ochre,” unpublished manuscript (Australian National University, 2009), 4a.

⁷⁵ George Horne and George Aiston, *Savage Life in Central Australia* (London: Macmillan, 1924), 128 - 130; Kerwin, *Aboriginal Dreaming Paths and Trading Routes*, 104.

⁷⁶ Hercus, “Leaving the Simpson Desert,” 29.

lines “Railway *yarilu’ waya’* Beltana *yarilu’ waya’*.”

The lead-up to the song creates some ambiguity about *when* Mathapurda encountered the steam train. In her published translation of this song, Hercus draws attention to a “chronological problem.”⁷⁷ The railway reached Beltana, Farina, then Marree in 1881, 1882, and 1884, respectively - events on the colonial calendar years before Mick McLean was born around 1888. However, both what he said in English and reiterated in Wangkangurru suggests that Mick McLean was a young boy when his father saw the train. How could Mick McLean be born after 1888 and yet be at Palkuru when his father witnessed the arrival of the train at the railway terminus in Beltana in 1881? This is impossible according to the rules of historical chronology that underpin academic historical practice today.

By pointing out the timeline that was not the index of Mick McLean’s imaginative travel to the past, Hercus draws attention to a track that was. She suggests that Mathapurda must have been to Parachilna multiple times, both before and after Mick McLean was born. Upon returning from these epic journeys tracking Dreaming creatures, people told and retold their travel stories and Hercus concludes, “it seems likely that he telescoped into one the two or more visits to Parachilna that he heard about as a child.”⁷⁸ While Hercus suggests that it was Mick McLean who “telescoped” the various journeys into one, it could also have been Mathapurda who disciplined multiple events onto the one narrative track.

Hercus’ solution to the “chronological problem” implies that the Wangkangurru track mapping the emu’s escape not only described the route that Mathapurda traveled to Parachilna, it formed an axis of mobility shaping how father or son, or perhaps both, imaginatively traveled to the site of the first Wangkangurru encounter with the steam train. While progress tracks entwined with commodity tracks structured settlers’ memories of colonial Beltana, Dreaming tracks entangled with Aboriginal economic routes formed conduits of Wangkangurru mobility to past places.

5. CONCLUSION

Departing from Beltana on 3 July 1881, the first train to Port Augusta sped up the mobility of both passengers and goods to their destination points, and for generations settlers’ futures would remain entangled with the mobility of commodities. When the Wangkangurru emu encountered the new railway as it escaped, the pathways of the Dreaming creature and steam train aligned ensuring that the bird continued running and running up Kuyani peaks until it was finally caught and

⁷⁷ Ibid. 32.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

ripped open. As the emu's blood was set in motion along the Great Northern line, Kuyani creatures traveling along Warioota and Sliding Rock creeks crossed the railway embedded in a logic that saw them "quarrel" at *Palthanha* before becoming "friends again" at the cameleers' camp. In contrast to Kuyani and Wangkangurru tracks, colonizers moved along tracks that tended toward the eradication of all others. As settlers used their legal institutions, government resources, technologies, and police forces to realize fantasies about the total possession of land, continuing mobilities along Aboriginal tracks underpinned the survival of Aboriginal geographies.

Viewing settler colonialism through a mobilities paradigm generates important extensions to the category of "mobility." Colonial settlements on Aboriginal land were conjunctures of spatial epistemologies and archives generated at colonial encounters reveal with particular clarity that mobilities were structured by different knowledge traditions. Closer engagement with non-European philosophies of motion multiplies the axes along which the movement of people, animals, and goods can be understood, expanding the conceptual space of mobilities research. In addition, examining four tracks shaping how people remembered, recorded, and revisited events at past Beltana illuminates that historical practices can be theorized as acts of imaginative "mobility" between the present and the past. Proposing this article as a fifth track facilitating readers' imaginative travel to late nineteenth-century Beltana, opens up possibilities for understanding "mobility" as central to historical methodologies.

In November 2014, when Tony Abbott described Eora land in 1788 as "nothing but bush," he deployed a myth that has been repeatedly used to grab Aboriginal land and deny Aboriginal spatial epistemologies. One key problem with Abbott's view of the past is that it continues an imperial tradition of envisioning a future emptied of Aboriginal tracks - an outlook informing government actions that can have disastrous implications for Aboriginal communities. As activists take to the streets to protest each discursive erasure of Aboriginal history and each renewed attempt to physically usurp Aboriginal people from land, historians critical of settler colonialism must pay greater attention to the continuing geographies of Aboriginal mobility that settler institutions systematically attempt to eradicate. Rendering visible the past as a place crisscrossed by the tracks of numerous beings, multi-axial histories of settler colonialism offer a departure point for futures beyond blank spaces.

BIOGRAPHY

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