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Poetic Tracks and Treading on Indigenous Lands: Examining Marlatt and Warland's and Akiwenzie-Damm's Literary Travels to Australia and Aotearoa

Movement and settlement are undeniably intertwined. As historian Tony Ballantyne aptly puts it in his 2014 article, settler colonialism begins with a “great contradiction”: “settlers’ were typically unsettled and mobility was their defining characteristic” (27). The formation of settler colonial societies not only involves the initial travel of settlers from the imperial metropole to the colony, but also the continued movements of resources, animals, and peoples, which take for granted the settler’s right to stay and move on Indigenous lands. As a white, cisgendered, heterosexual woman settler who resides on the land of the Lheidli T’enneh First Nation and studies writing by Indigenous, diasporic, and settler women poets who travel throughout and away from Canada, I reflect on the implications of my own and others’ movements as they relate to our unique relationships to the land on which we live and travel. Indigenous and settler writers who travel to and through other settler colonial locales can teach settlers a great deal about continued manifestations of colonial travel and alternative modes of moving ethically on settler colonial lands.

Daphne Marlatt and Betsy Warland’s “17:00 / coming into Port Pirie” and “30/5 8:50 / past Menindee,” from their 1988 *Double Negative*, a collection of poetry in which the settler lesbian poets traverse Australia by train while reflecting on travelling through “(ab) original country” (19), invites reflection on settler movements upon Indigenous lands. Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm’s poem “from turtle island to aotearoa,” in contrast, offers a different perspective on movement upon Indigenous lands from the perspective of a writer who is a member of the Chippewas of Nawash Unceded First Nation on Turtle Island. In this poem, the final piece in Akiwenzie-Damm’s 1993 collection *My Heart is a Stray Bullet*, she enacts a nation-to-nation relationship with the Māori people through “slow cautious steps” (50) upon their lands.

Through putting analysis of Marlatt and Warland’s and Akiwenzie-Damm’s poems in conversation with Eve Tuck (Unangaŋ) and K. Wayne Yang’s influential piece “Decolonization is not a Metaphor,” this paper demonstrates how writing that depicts different forms of travel—

particularly via rail and by foot—reveal possible forms of allyship with the Indigenous nations upon whose lands the poets move. While all three of the poets reject colonial heteropatriarchal language of travel and movement, which was used to label Indigenous land the territory of settlers and has excluded women travellers, when read through Tuck and Yang’s piece, the poems from *Double Negative* may be read as eliding the settlers’ complicity in settler colonialism via their particular form of travel. In contrast, “from turtle island to aotearoa” uses the Māori language to honour and respect Māori ways of being and moving upon their lands. As such, the poem demonstrates how Indigenous peoples may guide those of different positionalities to better understand how travel and everyday forms of movement, particularly walking, can reinforce Indigenous rights to and sovereignties over their lands.

Marlatt and Warland’s Feminist Travel Through “(ab) original country”

Thus far, most criticism on *Double Negative* has focused on its mode of articulating lesbian love. Brenda Carr Vellino, for example, analyzes how the form of the poem allows the poets to rewrite and combine “the love lyric and the long poem” (114), and Kevin Shaw examines how the poem conveys the “limits of lesbian expression” (155). Although both critics mention Marlatt and Warland’s interaction with Indigenous peoples in Australia, I extend their critiques to assess how Marlatt and Warland’s poetry intertwines decolonization with travel and movement. *Double Negative* is structured in three parts—“Double Negative,” “Crossing Loop,” and “Real 2”—in which the poets collaboratively reflect on their experiences aboard the Trans-Australian railway. The two poems I analyze come from “Double Negative,” a section in which the poets use a free verse lyrical style to describe poetically what they experience while gazing at the landscape from the window of the train. As they discuss in their mainly prose conversation in “Crossing Loop,” their poetry rejects the train as a “powerful industrial monster whose rhythms and approach are seen as very much like the male orgasm” (Marlatt 36). Instead, their diction and rhythms convey lesbian women’s experiences of moving on a train. Though they appear to view their “alternative version [vision]” (Marlatt, “Crossing Loop” 38, extra space in original) as a site for potential allyship with Indigenous peoples and their land, the form of solidarity they enact while aboard a colonial machine also has limitations.

Both “30/5 8:50 / past Menindee” and “17:00 / coming into Port Pirie,” which are titled, as are the other poems in this section, after places the writers pass while on the train, begin with the poets narrating what they view from the train’s window to critique the way the settler colonial language of English has been used to displace Indigenous peoples in Australia. Within the first few lines of each poem, the poets list the names of places they pass. While in “30/5 8:50 / past Menindee,” they list Indigenous place names such as “Nellungaloo” (17), in “17:00 / coming into Port Pirie,” they list names such as “Peterborough” as “anglo overlays in the name of / see-vill(ain)-I-say-tion” (19). Masculine exploratory travel, they show, is used to label Indigenous land to exert colonial heteropatriarchal control over it.

Elsewhere in the poem, Marlatt and Warland use punctuation to imply that colonial language has been used to displace and dispossess Indigenous peoples. They describe “Woomera ‘prohibited area...weapons testing range’ / bordering the largest aboriginal ‘occupied lands’”

(19, ellipses in original). This Royal Australian Air Force aerospace military site, established as an Australian-Anglo project following World War II and operated jointly with Britain (Dennis et al.), was named using the Aboriginal D'harawal word meaning "spear-thrower" (*D'harawal Dictionary*, "Spear Thrower"). The poets highlight the name of the site to point towards appropriative applications of Indigenous languages being used to justify the theft of Indigenous lands in settler colonial countries including Australia and Canada. In this case, the Royal Australian Airforce choosing an Indigenous word that means "spear thrower" seems intended to appropriate Indigenous forms of masculinity, problematically attaching them to white settler violence. Marlatt and Warland place quotation marks around the words "occupied lands" to suggest that a foreign invader has gained wrongful authority, partly through colonial naming practices. The quotation marks demonstrate that, while settlers may use language in such a way as to imply Indigenous peoples are "occupying" settler lands, settlers are indeed the foreign body who occupy the lands of Australia. As they make clear in both poems under discussion, they are travelling in "(ab) original country" (19), which was "'from the beginning' / ab / original" (14, slash and space in original). Marlatt and Warland highlight through their punctuation that Indigenous peoples are "original" here "from the beginning" (14), unlike "we who are gone," who are "un/ / original here" (14, slash and space in original). Through their use of brackets and slashes, Marlatt and Warland claim their positions as travellers and critics of colonial languages.

In "17:00 / coming into Port Pirie," the speakers extend their critique of colonial heteropatriarchal languages to linguistic and physical expectations for women aboard a train and describe their experience in "negative feminine space" (20). They view themselves as ignored and pushed aside not only because they are women, but lesbian women. They describe going for dinner on the train where they are asked "are you ladies alone," to which they answer, "'no' / 'we're together'" (20), articulating their status as a lesbian couple. Kristi Siegel explains that from the eighteenth century onward when the concept of travel took on its modern connotations, middle- and upper-class women travelling together were not considered protected when travelling, as "it is only by the presence of a male escort that women can remain safe and unsullied" (58). In his discussion of how railways have been represented in Australian literature, Russell McDougall states that "travel by train in Australian literature is a particularly negative experience for women" (78). He confirms that "the station attendant was supposed in the colonial age of railway travel in Australia to be the guardian of the female traveller" (78). Through recording the male voice, presumably of the attendant, passing judgement on Marlatt and Warland's choice to travel without a man, the poets highlight and reject heteronormative and patriarchal prejudices pertaining to the helpless heterosexual woman traveller aboard a train. As lesbian women travelling together without male accompaniment, the poets emphasize resistance to the heteropatriarchal history and language of train travel.

The poets further deconstruct the implications of the word "traine" to demonstrate the way language has prescribed passive forms of movement for women. In "30/5 8:50 / past Menindee," the poets describe their particular experience of train travel in relation to the

“motion of this / train,” before poetically examining the implications of the language of train travel for women:

traine, to

feminize (part of

a(d)dress)

and not merely in tow (13, italics in original)

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “train” is a “French masculine noun” which has been used in a variety of ways, including to mean “succession of people or moving things,” “course of action, way of life,” and “series, succession, sequence.” In contrast, the “French feminine noun *traine*” has been used to denote “delay, act of tarrying” or “an elongated back of a robe or skirt” (“*traine/train*”). In its masculine form, the word is generally associated with a masculine, directed form of movement; as a feminine word, it is associated with being hampered or with clothing that drags. In traditional travel literature, in contrast to men’s active roles, women are often presented as “merely in tow,” unimportant appendages, and Marlatt and Warland critique this positioning.

In the following stanzas, Marlatt and Warland use imagery associated with women’s bodies as well as poetic rhythms to convey their experience aboard the train as lesbian women. The poets conceive of their female connection to the Nullarbor Desert via their bodies:

we go inside

out

into the womb of the continent

ochre, red earth, salt plain (13)

Their representation of their travel suggests being enveloped within the mother’s body and inside the feminized land. The caesura in the final quoted line, the potential of reading the lines as having an iambic metre, and the physical distance between the words “inside” and “out” create a slow rhythm with long pauses, signifying a visual and oral lull. This may represent moving in tandem with, as they discuss in “Crossing Loop,” “the rocking motion of the train” and the bodily rhythms of the mother’s, and land’s, womb (Marlatt 37). Their colour imagery, here and elsewhere in the collection, as when they describe, “we are in space (red, red / your flesh i taste” (23), subverts typical colour associations. As Morgan Johnson and Alexandra Simpson explain in their 2019 article for *The Goose*, in which they assess the use of the colour red in the play “Upstream Downtown,” red has often been associated with women being available for men’s “consumption,” as well as with “the devil, femme fatale, [and] slut” (6). In contrast, Marlatt and Warland symbolically use the colour to imagine themselves as moving

“inside” the land, and thus in-tune with the landscape, as well as “inside” each other, as such, with women’s eroticism.

In “Crossing Loop,” the poets further describe their travel from a revisionist, one might even say, ecofeminist perspective. They state that they view the train tracks as an “umbilical cord . . . representing our continuous dependency on the earth” (Warland, “Crossing Loop” 37), demonstrating their desire to revision the (colonial) tracks as creating a maternal connection with the earth. Marlatt and Warland’s metaphorical link between women’s bodies and the land has clear resonances with ecofeminism, a body of knowledge that envisions a connection between and “works against the colonization and occupation of both women and land/nature” (Darias-Beautell 186). However, as Darias-Beautell’s somewhat metaphorical use of the word “colonization” implies, to create a female connection with the earth, ecofeminism also risks erasing literal colonization of Indigenous lands and Indigenous relationships with those lands.

Navigating the Colonial Implications of Train Travel with Tuck and Yang

The way in which certain elements of linguistic forms of allyship with Indigenous peoples deflect settler complicity in colonialism may be understood through Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang’s “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor” (2012). In their article, Tuck and Yang discuss ongoing modes of settler colonization wherein Indigenous peoples are continually “erased” so Indigenous land may be “recast as property and as resource” (6). The discourse of decolonization gets taken up by settlers in ways that allow them to enact “moves to innocence”: “strategies or positionings that attempt to relieve the settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege, without having to change much at all” (10). Marlatt and Warland’s language of Indigenous peoples, space, and movement, when read in conversation with Tuck and Yang’s analysis, reminds readers of the potential problems of the type of solidarity they envision while aboard the colonial technology of the train.

Marlatt and Warland’s description of journeying into the “womb” of the earth assumes a potentially problematic relationality with Indigenous lands. Tuck and Yang explain settler nativism wherein “settlers locate or invent a long-lost ancestor who is rumored to have had ‘Indian blood’” (10) as a “move to innocence” through which settlers fabricate Indigenous identity to imagine a connection to lands that are not theirs, attempt to absolve their guilt for settler colonialism, and make a false claim over Indigenous lands. Although Marlatt and Warland do not directly describe themselves as “Aboriginal,” their use of language suggests a kind of self-Indigenization. In relation to Marlatt and Warland’s problematic incorporation of Australian non-human animals, Deborah M. Mix importantly notes the potential problem with “Anglo-Canadian lesbians magically transformed into primal creatures linked closely to the earth on which they travel” (308). This closeness to the earth, which may be read as mitigating their complicity in colonialism in Canada and Australia, is also evident in their abstraction of ochre. Elsewhere in their collection, they metaphorically equate ochre with menstrual blood, perhaps to impose a false connection between their menstruating bodies and Indigenous land. For example, in “10:33 / Forrest,” they view “red ochre menstrual stain / (source of earth’s life blood)” (24). This view of the landscape risks abstracting an Aboriginal spiritual material from

its cultural context and associating it, instead, with menstruation and women's bodies. Paul S.C. Taçon notes, "perhaps as early as 60,000 years ago, ochres were used for a range of purposes, from ritual (e.g. burials) to rock-art, and probably also body art" by Indigenous peoples of Australia (33). Instead of describing this connection, Marlatt and Warland's settler feminist poetics may be seen as problematically metamorphizing the substance into evidence of their own female connection to Australia.

The poets appear to view their feminist connection to the land as occurring through the train, which they see as an "umbilical track" (16). Whereas they might conceive of the train tracks as maternal, it is important to realize that the train was an important instrument of attempted settler colonial erasure of Indigenous peoples in both Australia and Canada. Eric Andrew-Gee succinctly explains that the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) was a tool of settler colonial mobile power: "Construction of the CP railway was seen as essential to the growth and defence of the country in the years after Confederation – but First Nations sometimes stood in the way." Daniel Francis explains, "More than any other single aspect of White civilization, the railway transformed the world of [Indigenous peoples], especially in Western Canada" (176). The completion of the railway, he points out, brought settlers and supplies west, transported products, and expanded the Canadian tourism industry (176-77). Built between 1912 and 1917, the Trans-Australian railway served a similar purpose as the CPR in Canada—connecting parts of the continent via rail, incentivizing federation in the west, and allowing settlers to populate the land more easily. Also similar to Canada, the building of the railway displaced many Indigenous peoples from their traditional lands (Barnes; Maher; "Trans-Australian Railway Workers' Camp"). Historically and in the present, railways are both a literal and figurative assertion of settler colonial entitlement through mobility over Indigenous lands. Though Marlatt and Warland point out some of the implications of the English language on Indigenous peoples and their lands, their elision of the settler colonial implications of train travel both in Australia and Canada may be seen as a move to innocence through which they deflect their own complicity in settler colonialism as settlers from Canada aboard a form of settler technology in Australia.

"so this is what it is to be / a stranger in another land": Decolonial Movement on Indigenous Lands

According to Tuck and Yang, because in a settler colonial society "[l]and is what is most valuable, contested, required" (5), "decolonization in the settler colonial context must involve the repatriation of land" (7). Although, of course, poetry alone may not return land to Indigenous peoples, poetry can do some work in this regard; as a start, it may demonstrate other ways of being on and moving on Indigenous lands that respect continued Indigenous sovereignty. While Marlatt and Warland are ideologically and physically removed from the Indigenous peoples on whose lands they travel by the colonial technology of the train, Akiwenzie-Damm's form of movement connects her to the Indigenous peoples on whose lands she treads. Her poem "from turtle island to aotearoa" makes clear, beginning with its title, that Aotearoa is the sovereign territory of the Māori people. The poem, which consists of seven short sections, describes a trip to Aotearoa (the Māori name for New Zealand), during which

she follows and moves with the Māori people. By labelling the territories she arrives from and comes to by their Indigenous names, without appealing to settler language or naming processes, and appropriately using the Māori language in relation to their movement and her own, Akiwenzie-Damm asserts continued Indigenous connection to and sovereignty over their lands.

She writes as a guest on the land of another Indigenous nation, a nation who is connected to this land as she is connected to her own on Turtle Island, the name some Indigenous peoples have given to the land now commonly referred to as North and Central America. Through her use of Anishinaabemowin, she positions herself as related to the land of Turtle Island where “my grandparents’ bones are cradled by ahki” (51). Rather than using a settler word to describe her relationship to the land, she uses the word “ahki,” which, according to Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg writer Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, “includes all aspects of creation: landforms, elements, plants, animals, spirits, sounds, thoughts, feelings, and energies and all of those emergent systems, ecologies, and networks that connect these elements” (161). Akiwenzie-Damm’s use of the term conveys her view of herself as in relationship with her land as well as with the more-than-human beings that are part of and reside on it.

As she uses Anishinaabemowin to express her relationship to her land, she includes the Māori language to demonstrate her understanding of their belonging on their land. For example, she expresses her appreciation to the “the tangata whenua who have not challenged my being here” (53). The Māori dictionary states that this word has several meanings, among which are the “local people, hosts, indigenous people - people born of the whenua, i.e. of the placenta and of the land where the people’s ancestors have lived and where their placenta are buried.” As Akiwenzie-Damm anchors her identity in her connection to her ancestors, land, and more-than-human relations, through her careful use of diction, she asserts that the Māori, as well, have authority over their land and its visitors because of their embodied and ancestral connection to the place. In the poem, Akiwenzie-Damm illustrates the view she asserts in “We Belong to This Land: A View of ‘Cultural Difference’”:

The Native peoples of this land are *fundamentally different from anyone else*. . . . *The basis of the difference is the land, our passion for it and our understanding of our relationship with it. We belong to this land*. . . . Our cultures and spirituality arise from our relationship with the land. (21, italics in original)

In “from turtle island to aotearoa,” Akiwenzie-Damm suggests a connection between Indigenous nations based on their mutual belonging to and sovereignty over their lands. Akiwenzie-Damm demonstrates her respect for Māori sovereignty and relationship with their land through the type of movement she practices while on their land. Her primary mode of transportation is careful walking. She describes her motion in such terms: “slow cautious steps taken” (50) and “my moccasins step timid / on this part of mother earth” (51). Her gait is gentle because of her awareness that she is treading on territory that is not hers. She reflects a few lines later, “so this is what it is to be / a stranger in another land’ i think to myself as foot follows foot” (51). In contrast to Marlatt and Warland who rarely step outside the colonial

confines of the train, Akiwenzie-Damm interacts with the land physically and spiritually by walking mindfully upon it. The careful steps she takes indicate that she recognizes her non-belonging to the place she visits. This is also indicated by her “drifting” movement, emphasized in section “(iii – drifting),” the section from which these quotations come. While drifting may indicate a form of aimless, passive movement, being “driven or borne along by a current” (*OED*), Akiwenzie-Damm uses it in such a way to signal her non-belonging on Aotearoa. Her movement here may be similar to the “leaves falling from sturdy limbs” she describes later in the poem (52). She enacts a form of movement that is responsive to the land and its peoples, purposefully dissociating herself from the land to make clear that it is not hers.

In contrast to her walking on land, Akiwenzie-Damm depicts the movement of the Māori people largely through language around water. In Akiwenzie-Damm’s first mention of the Māori people, she describes her intent to “join the waves of maori / lapping at the shore of the place.” Here, the Māori are depicted as moving like water, almost as if they are a part of the ocean. Through this particular use of language, Akiwenzie-Damm pays respect to Māori relationships with water. Māori writer Robert Sullivan concludes his poem “Ocean Birth” by describing “every song to remind us— / we are skin of the ocean” (62). Sullivan’s language demonstrates that Māori people view themselves as part of the ocean that surrounds their land and from which they came. Akiwenzie-Damm’s use of the words “waves” and “lapping” for the Māori people convey not that they are “like” water, but that they are “of” the water. She makes their relation to the water clear through her use of the Māori language: “the convoy that was mataatua waka / led us eastward to this place” (50). According to the Māori dictionary, *Mātaatua* means “migration canoe which landed at Whakatāne and finally ended at Hokianga before being dragged overland to Tākou.” The term conveys a Māori form of movement connected to Māori history, ancestors, and water. Akiwenzie-Damm thus demonstrates her respectful intention to follow and travel in congruence with Māori people over lands and waters of which they view themselves as part.

As well as observing their movement and connection with their lands, Akiwenzie-Damm models forming a relationship with the people on whose lands she moves through offering gratitude and gifts for their permission to be on their land. In the second to last section, she describes:

i make simple gifts of gathered words
but if i could sing
i would sing songs of thanks
to all our relations who guide our steps
to the whakapapa whispered on the waves
to the tangata whenua who have not challenged my being here
or my attempts at poetry

to the earth winds sky water

to moon stars and sun

to creatures of land and air and sea (53)

Although Akiwenzie-Damm claims she cannot sing, her use of repetition and enjambment demonstrates an oral element within her poetry which conveys the relationship between Indigenous poetry, storytelling, and singing as means of carrying and sharing cultural traditions. Her “gifts” to the peoples and lands further exemplifies kinship based on reciprocity. Both the Māori and Anishinaabe peoples have traditions of providing gifts to the land and other peoples, including when engaging with travellers. Akiwenzie-Damm recognizes the gifts provided by the tangata whenua, the land and, indeed, “all our relations” and seeks to show reciprocity through her “gifts of gathered words”: her poetry. Her appreciation for the relations who “guide our steps,” along with her description of the “the convoy that was mataatua waka” which “led us eastward to this place” (50), reveals the importance of *following* the sovereign peoples of the territory on which one moves. Akiwenzie-Damm’s careful and respectful movement in the wake of the Māori people is a demonstration of solidarity between Indigenous nations from which settlers can also begin to learn how to relate ethically to Indigenous peoples.

Through carefully reading the work of Indigenous writers who move on Indigenous lands, settlers can begin to think about possible ways of relating to Indigenous peoples in more thoughtful ways. We can start to reflect on how certain ways of moving, via train, for example, are mired in colonial history, while others, like walking, may allow us to respectfully become acquainted with Indigenous lands and peoples. This may help us envision a future that honours how Indigenous “relationships to land comprise [...] their epistemologies, ontologies, and cosmologies” (Tuck and Yang 6), and work to care for and repatriate that land through our travel and everyday movements in Canada and abroad.

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scholar, she studies the work of Indigenous writers to learn from them how certain forms of movement may honour Indigenous sovereignty and relationships to their lands.