

Transits and Returns

[With Kimberley Moulton. *Transits and Returns*. Vancouver Art Gallery/Institute of Modern Art. 18-26, 2019.]

Hello, Kimberley.

I have an enduring memory of our first day in Norway last November 30. You, a tall Yorta Yorta woman delicate on the icy sidewalks of Kirkenes. Your usually confident stride minced by the threat of a slip. Métis from Amiskwaciy, Northern Turtle Island, now known as Edmonton, Canada, and now living in Oscana, Pile of Bone, Regina, I am more accustomed to winter. I felt compassion but had no remedy. Your uncertain steps caused me to reconsider conditions I take for granted.

We were well above the Arctic Circle, enjoying the company of the activist and architect, Kabita Chakma, her teenage daughter Sophia, and Sami artist Matti Aikio, our guide. Guests of the Office for Contemporary Art Norway (OCA), we were launching *Sovereign Words: Indigenous Art, Curation and Criticism*, and, thanks to OCA's insightful and generous director, Katya García-Antón, we were gifted with a ten-day tour of Sápmi territory.

Back to the ice. Kabita and Sophia—also living in Australia, but Indigenous to the Chittagong Hill Tracts region of Bangladesh—were equally unsteady. Well, it didn't take long for the trio to buy crampons at the local pharmacy. I must admit astonishment. Your solution was outside my imaginary. I had seen the ice grips before, but only on the elderly. Conditions are like this at home, often worse. Why don't I own a pair? Would I rather fall on my ass—as I do several times a season—than be seen in safety gear associated with over-caution?

The story strikes me as a metaphor for a complexity of the Indigenous contemporary condition. How do we maintain ourselves and yet be open to change when guests in the land of others. At home, I am Métis. When I travel to other parts of Turtle Island, especially to primarily non-settler gatherings, I am Métis but also Aboriginal. Aboriginal is a name for the identity formed when Native peoples from different Nations within a single colonial nation gather. Aboriginal is a shared political space that exists between one's local Nation and identities and the nation-state that endeavors to contain you. Indigenous is a relative new space and identity formed when First Peoples who live under different colonial nation-states gather. Indigenous is an inter-National identity formed by Native peoples who have more in common with each other than they do with the colonial nations that surround them. Indigenous peoples are a privileged minority who are able to travel and access experiences beyond their Nation. It comes with responsibilities.

We traversed Sami territory in Sami company. Knowledge keepers told us how Norway, Sweden, and Finland restrict Sami/reindeer migration, and therefore Sami movement as territory, as sovereignty. We met Sami artist Maret Anne Sara, whose lightbox installation, "Pile 'o Sápmi," compares the recent state culling of her brother's reindeer with the colonial destruction of the Bison on the Great Plains of Turtle Island. In the space of the Indigenous we recognize the shared distortions caused by contact, the shared truths that pre-exist and endure colonization, and devise new modes of being contemporary and Indigenous.

A Yorta Yorta, a pair of Chakma people, a Sami, and Métis take a walk on the ice together. The Sami wears footwear appropriate to his territory. Those unaccustomed to ice, do not hesitate to get the right gear, to adapt. Stubborn me. My Tasmanian Blundstones manage the snow we had on the Prairies that winter well enough but are unfit for ice. At the time, I didn't put on the huge winter boots I brought, or buy crampons, because both seemed like over-kill. On reflection, perhaps I would rather have risked a fall than don devices that might signal me as a guest, a tourist, rather than a fellow northerner. Indigenous is a negotiated and emerging rather than essential identity. We learn as we go.

Your friend.

David

PS: As soon as I got home, I bought a pair of crampons.

Dear David,

Though months have passed since our trip to Sami Country and arriving in Kirkines I can still feel the cold on my face the comforting soft light that allowed us to see the reindeer tracks and ancient mountains. Albeit if only for a few hours a day, I have never looked forward to the light as much as I did when in Norway.

I was certainly treading lightly that morning we stepped outside to begin our journey with Matti and our fellow travelers and friends Kabita and Sophia. After a good night of rest (and almost falling asleep at the table the night before and onto Matti's reindeer steaks!) I was ready to share in the time together and learn from our Sami brothers and sisters.

Being a freshwater river girl and growing up in country Australia my experience of snow is quite limited, my visit to your Turtle Island the year before last was when I experienced snow and coldness in such a way for the first time. Your observations of my cautious stride was very true, it came from both the uncertainty of each step on the ice and where my feet would take me but also in thinking about the footsteps that came before, the many generations of Sami who are sovereign to those lands, I treaded carefully with them in mind.

Coming from Melbourne I didn't have the right shoes, I was lucky to be lent a pair from Liv at the OCA, and Drew brought them all the way to the airport, I was hesitant to wear another person's shoes for fear of them not knowing my feet luckily, they supported me well as did the spikes! It is curious that you considered my nervous steps as I admired your confident ones and advice in crossing this new terrain.

I feel when travelling to another country means that we occupy a third space, we are off our country and we are present and a guest on another's however, we are also 'Indigenous' as you say, we have 'more in common with each other than the colonial nations that surround us'. We travel because we can, because it opens our minds and we connect with our fellow First Peoples,

this is not just a gesture of solidarity or rebellion to leave the nest but a conscious counter action to the colonial control we have endured as First Peoples.

I remember sitting in the car on our trip and silently eating lunch in darkness, we listened to Matti talk passionately about his reindeer and cultural practices, we heard how the warming of our planet means the rivers are not yet frozen to safely cross with their reindeer herds and the ongoing colonization of Sami country meant that the Norwegian government were attempting to disrupt this Sami practice. The agenda seemed clear, to control land, boarders and Sami movement which in turn breaks a cultural practice, affects financial independence and connection to country. It made my blood boil and hearing from Maret Anne Sara about her brother's fight for his Sovereign rights were an all too familiar story. I wonder do we connect as Indigenous not only by our similarities but because of our differences. Our lands and waterways are at constant threat, our languages in many cases in a state of revival, our cultural materials still locked away and our contemporary art absent in the galleries, but we all have different needs within this space.

I agree, with the privilege of travel comes a responsibility to your people and territory, to uphold your culture and identity, to share and to learn and to give back these experiences. The responsibility is to also the lands which you are a guest in understanding cultural protocols, respecting their ways, being humble and to listen deeply. There is also a responsibility to each other, in respecting our individual lived experiences of being First Peoples- your Metis ways and Kabita and Sophia's Chittagong Hill regions ways and my Yorta Yorta ways mean we circle around each other with a central point of meeting that connects us. I wonder where our communities would be now if we did not have global movement of Indigenous people.

Warmest wishes from Kulin country,

Kimberley

P.S I'm glad to hear you have those crampons, I've saved mine for my next Turtle Island and Sami Territory visits.

Dear, Kimberley.

Such good memories and words! Yes! Meeting with other First Peoples, especially in their home territories, is “a conscious counter action to [] colonial control.” It’s an end-run around, and unrecognition, of colonial authority. It was a great honour to be hosted by Sami people, to tour their land, see their Parliament, galleries, museums, other institutions, and homes *before* going down to Oslo. Our future depends of recognizing, visiting, and collaborating with fellow First Peoples—and other non-colonial allies—to imagine and built alternative worlds.

I've been thinking about the *Transits and Returns* exhibition, and the privilege and responsibility of Indigenous travel. I was wondering about your reflections, how you live the complexity of being a local and inter-National person.

Some thoughts:

Being, including human being, is existence in time and space, in relation and in motion. Blackfoot metaphysics, explains Dr. Leroy Little Bear, is based on the concept of “constant flux.”ⁱ Everything is in motion. Every being is internally animated and also participates in a larger flow. Some beings, mayflies for instance, have short, rapid lives. Rocks, however, exist for a very long, slow time. Some things may appear inert but vibrate at the atomic level. Mayflies and rocks have different relations in, with, and as time. They both have their being on this large orb that moves in relation to other masses that swirl in a galaxy that, in turn, is in relation to endless other celestial systems. Being is relative; being is relations.

Little Bear further explains that the holism of the Plains Indian philosophy is one in which a person and society goes with these flows. People learn these systems, honor, and abide with them.ⁱⁱ The Western European mindset, he argues—with its sense of linear time, singular god, hierarchical organization, and obsession with growth and progress—is the antithesis of Indigenous ways of knowing and being. It runs against the flow of natural systems. It is a disorder that attempts to channel, accelerate, or otherwise disturb these flows.

Colonial capitalism is predicated on a hierarchy of winners and losers, agents and objects. Its perverse being is not an expression of timeless circulating flow, but cancerous growth whose progress eventually means the death of both the exploiter and exploited. Colonial capitalism desires efficiencies. Its utopia is the frictionless flow of goods, capital, information, and privileged bodies. Colonial settler capitalism divides nature from people, sees nature as a resource in need of containment, extraction, and refinement. It narrates nature as resistance to capital’s frictionless flow. Colonial settler capitalism sees Indigenous peoples—those persons who do not separate themselves from nature—as similarly requiring containment, extraction, and refinement.

A signal difference between agents and objects is motion. Colonialism and carceral capitalism endeavor to restrict the motion of non-compliant bodies, keep folks from impeding resource exploitation and commerce. In the territory now known as Canada, this meant removing First Nations from their territories and concentrating them on reserves and restricting their movements through the pass system. From 1885 until 1951, “Indians” had to get permission from white Indian agents to leave the reserve. Inuit also suffered relocations, and many Métis, the Road Allowance People, were run off their lands and had to live in the spaces between settler properties.

Indigenous people are sovereign not only because they live their claim to a specific territory recognized by the colonial nation. We are sovereign by virtue of our motion, our performance of territory. Moving, visiting, migrating, the pow-wow circuit, are all exercises of domain rather than claims of dominion. When we travel inter-Nationally, we are learners and ambassadors.

How do you think of your travel? How might we, and the objects in our care, be ambassadors?

Your friend.
David

ⁱ http://www.sfu.ca/sfublogs-archive/departments/humanities-institute/1101_traditional-knowledge-and-humanities-leroy-little-bear.html

ⁱⁱ <http://blogs.sd62.bc.ca/danddtech/wp-content/blogs.dir/24/files/2014/02/LittleBear1.pdf>

Dear David,

Your words “we are sovereign by the virtue of our motion” have been lingering in my thoughts.

I currently am a guest on the land I live on known as Melbourne. I live on Wurundjeri country and I work on Wurundjeri and Boon Wurrung land, I am sovereign to the country we know as Australia but my land is two hours north of where I now call home. Home can be transient and fluid, my heart is my Yorta Yorta country and the town I grew up, but home is not always driven by where we live or come from, it is guided by the people that we love the spaces both built form and natural that we connect to.

In *Transits and Returns* the curators speak about the territories of land, sky and waters as a form Indigenous interconnectivity – that the space between is in fact what connects us. The air we breathe and the trees that give us life, our stories in the stars and the ripple of the oceans we feel on our feet are present now and connect us to the past, Im hoping will be here for our futures too. There is immense power in our voices travelling as a collective, the works come together as the ‘global Indigenous’ they hold space where we have been absent or directed by a western art framework but each work talks specifically to a cultural context not like the other.

There are many factors that have influenced my movement. Travelling overseas came from the wanting to experience the world in a way that my grandmothers and father could not do, to live their dreams. It is as you say, ‘a resistance to colonial settle capitalism’ and a history of containment that drives this movement, like your people David, mine were also forced onto missions and reserves. My great great great grandmother Kitty was taken from her camp and moved onto a mission called Maloga, it was meant to be a safe place for the protection of women and children from the brutes of the Australian frontier, but she would return back to her country, only to be picked up time and again. Her daughter, my great great grandmother Ada was born on the mission under the eye of the white manager, then followed my great grandmother Rebecca and grandmother Clare. Moved and removed, my community were sovereign bodies played in the cruel game of ‘nation building’.

I sometimes feel hopeless to the ongoing racism, the destruction of land, the politics of community that are all a condition of colonization and my solution to this is to travel. Travel to learn, to breath in the air on the country that is not mine knowing that it is what connects me home and to my Ancestors-as much as it grounds me in that place and time. I am of course not

immune to the capitalist structures of tourism and travel and would be arrogant to say otherwise. I've done the tourist thing, but it is our Indigenous stand point that set our direction in the world separate to the colonial settler approach, it is not about taking or personal gain, but learning and the capacity to share.

I have been compelled to travel also in pursuit of the Ancestral objects that have been removed from country and taken overseas. To enter the museum archives and speak to the souls of the cultural materials of my people, speak to the Ancestral remains that are held captive to this day. I travel to bear witness in where they sit, to connect with the people that hold them and to understand how these histories influence First Peoples representation in contemporary art and cultural spaces today. My presence in the spaces is holding them to account, they must remember, they must acknowledge.

In our culture we had (*have*) messengers. A select few that had the birth right to travel onto other people's country with permission, treading lightly and with intent. They carried message sticks, intricately designed wooded rods that communicated to clans to come together for ceremonies and business. It was the messenger's role to respectfully negotiate across borders. I see this practice having evolved and changed in our community. I do not proclaim to hold such a status however, being someone that crosses boundaries, respectfully negotiating and being considerate of country is something I connect to. Me as an ambassador I am not so convinced, me as a form of messenger, a Yorta Yorta woman that receives and shares knowledge, that connects to others and to objects I can relate to.

It is this inter-connectivity of 'the space between' that anchors *Transit and Returns* and the multiple directions of the past, present and future that manifests in our lives as First Peoples.

I recall our afternoon tea stop in northern Norway. In the crisp silence on Sami country the Metis, the Chittagoing Hill Track women, the Sami and the Yorta Yorta understood each other. Standing outside by the car we ate chunks of reindeer jerky sliced off by Matti's horn knife, staring at the mountains just visible through the darkness we did not need to speak, the country and the space between spoke for us.

Not goodbye but speak to you soon,

Your friend,
Kimberley