

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

**Traci Brynne Voyles**, *Wastelanding: Legacies of Uranium Mining in Navajo Country*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015. ISBN: 9780816692644 (cloth); ISBN: 9780816692675 (paper)

Traci Brynne Voyles takes on resource extraction, settler colonialism, and environmental racism in her compelling analysis of the impact of the uranium boom in Diné Bikéyah. Diné Bikéyah, she explains, is what the Diné (or Navajo) call their land that stretches over the Four Corners where New Mexico, Arizona, Utah and Colorado meet.

Voyles opens her book with a remarkable and tragic tale about the colonial decimation of Diné peach orchards in 1846 when over 4,150 trees were destroyed:

It's not implausible to venture a guess that these binges of violence against peach trees occurred as proxy to settler frustrations about the newly conquered Southwest and the challenges it presented to American notions of what good agricultural land should look like. Indeed, ideas about landscape and people, throughout this notorious removal campaign, served as the primary and most powerful impetus of colonial violence against people and peaches alike. (p.ix)

In this passage, the materiality that Voyles brings to her study is evident. She scales violence that occurred during the uranium boom down to the body, and peach even, drawing on a feminist approach that also centrally situates settler colonialism. Voyles suggests that “[e]nvironmental injustices must always be viewed through settler colonialism” (p.23), a thesis that fits her project adequately. More broadly building on Sylvia Hood Washington’s idea of “environmental justice history” she provides a “detailed historiography” that locates the relationship between coloniality and nature, detailing uranium mining as a “slow violence” or “delayed destruction” over time (p.5). In the book, she explores

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the ways in which resources come to enact, enable, and sometime embody colonial relationships between the U.S. settler colonial state and Native nations, focusing on the ways in which discourses about lands and the peoples who inhabit them shape how colonial violence occurs. (p.ix)

Informed by feminist thinkers, including Gillian Rose, her intervention is that “landscapes of extraction are...forms of representations as well as empirical objects” (p.8). Key to this argument is that land is uninhabited or uninhabitable, “except for Indians”:

Remaking native land as settler home involves the exploitation of natural resources, to be sure, but it also involves a deeply complex construction of that land as always already belonging to the settler—his manifest destiny—or as undesirable, unproductive, or unappealing: in short, as wasteland. (p.7)

With wide reaching in-depth empirical detail, Voyles draws on a range of historical geography and geology texts, federal documents, and newspaper archives, among other sources. She clearly demonstrates her theoretical contribution through well-researched examples that show how the material conditions of deserts come to be imagined by settlers as worthless. Here she follows Valerie Kuletz’s “wasteland discourse”, but does not stop there, as she is also concerned with the “treadmill of production” and how racialized spaces and environmental racism render “space marginal, worthless, and pollutable” (p.9).

Voyles argues wasteland “has been a key and unexplored component of environmental racism” (p.9). Further to these significant contributions concerning violence, land, the environment and settler colonialism, her feminist move to scale down to the body is also key. This was particularly well done in terms of the imaginary of a uranium prospector. She also argues that “colonial epistemologies do not

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just look on deserts as wastelands but that wastelands of many kinds are constituted through racial and spatial politics that render certain bodies and landscapes pollutable” (p10).

I was drawn to her feminist analysis and preferential treatment of feminist scholars. For example, she first and foremost draws on Deborah Bird Rose’s definition of settler colonialism in another perhaps subtle but productive de-centering of a narrative and field that would be well defined more often through a feminist lens.

There was one element of the book, and it was a significant segment of Voyles’ theoretical contribution, that caused some discomfort. The idea that “racialized bodies are wastelanded” presented throughout the narrative was thoughtful, yet at times felt distanced from the lived reality and violence Indigenous women and girls face. I would go as far as saying that references to sexual violence were in places somewhat gratuitous, like reference to the rape metaphor and a potential conflation of land with bodies. Here, I am questioning the utility of this conflation in a theoretical sense. I do not mean to suggest that the uranium industry has not had significant impacts on bodies and particularly Indigenous bodies. However, I am suggesting that since the subject matter in *Wastelanding* does not directly take on issues of sexual violence, it makes the theoretical aspects of the argument perhaps (too) all-encompassing.

As a scholar situated on the unceded and ancestral territories of the Squamish, Tsleil-Waututh, and Musqueam people living in an inner-city neighbourhood in Vancouver, within my regional geography in Canada, dialogues around missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls are present in national discourse as well as quite locally. Within this context, and given the visceral experiences reported around sexual violence, my sense is that the theoretical uptake of such a topic requires careful attention. Rape should make us feel uncomfortable and it’s important to move this dialogue from the private to public. How this is done requires close attention.

Voyles does this in part by drawing on John Locke’s definition of property and relating this to a natural/civil binary. This is relevant to Voyles’ project and the reference to how and why colonialism

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operates through gender remains crucial (p.32). Again, writings about penetrating native virgin land should make one uncomfortable (p.33), and given the seriousness of gender violence I wonder as to the utility of this as a theme and the work it does for Voyles throughout.

The book has novel and extremely worthwhile intentions and these are valuable for radical geographical thought and praxis. There is a gap in geography in and around meaningfully engagements with Indigenous feminism. Further, though settler colonialism has gained much traction as of late, there is also a failure amongst radical scholars, particularly in settler states including North America, to place themselves within the landscapes they inhabit. This includes the erasure of Indigenous bodies and claims to land as well as the significance of how resources remain key to these erasures and colonial violence. This context of erasure makes Traci Brynne Voyles' contribution all the more valuable and worthy of a thorough read.

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