A Curriculum of Migrant Home: Settler Geographies, Land and Colonial Place-making

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Abstract

In this article, I examine two ideas that have provoked me to reconsider my relationship to decolonising work as a settler. First, I consider the idea of home and the grounds, both material and symbolic, that make such “home-making” possible as a settler moving between states with similar aggressive investments in what Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2015) calls white possessive logics. Second, I take up a practice increasingly common in Australia – Welcomes to Country – that complicates how land is positioned as a space for people to gather. While I don’t suggest that Welcomes to Country are a panacea that resolve settler co-opting of acknowledgements as a tool of innocence (Asher, Curnow, & Davis, 2018), there is something inherently disruptive in Welcomes that might prove ethically instructive for those of us who find ourselves migrating within the settler-colonial sphere as we seek to make new homes.

Keywords: Reflections and reflexivity, sense of place, provoking colonial settler narratives

Introduction

The tires of the Boeing 777, flight VA8, touch the ground in Brisbane. I know how the story goes from here. Thirteen and a half hours and eleven and a half thousand kilometres in a plane does things to people: there is a sense of anxiety, weariness and impatience that percolates through the cabin, bubbling out of the plane into the terminal. Those who are arriving back home and those arriving in Australia for leisure are, while differently so, excited at the prospect of leaving the airport and walking into the bright warmth of the Queensland sun. For others, the relief that comes with the end of a long journey is delayed by the imminent departure of a connecting flight that reminds us that we aren’t home yet.

After the final leg of my journey, I arrive in the northern tropical city of Townsville and catch my ride home. Here, the familiarity and comforts that follow lull me into a sense of security. This feeling is failed, however, by an inescapable sense of foreignness, albeit one that doesn’t make me feel unsafe. All around me, I’m hyperaware of the signification of place and history through the landscape, an awareness that silently whispers, “this is not your home, but it looks like it could be.” I am often reminded that I am a visitor, a migrant, to a place that is unfamiliar in spite of the very familiar echoes of history, culture and politics that resonate in this place. Complicating this is the fundamental tenuousness of my life here in a way that I’ve never experienced; any sense of home is

subject to disestablishment at a moment's notice by a state that can invalidate the colonial license (visa) to be here. For the first time in my life, I'm not shielded by citizenship and able to call on the guarantees of safety in place that come with it. Yet, there is no sense of real fear or disquiet about disruption; as a white male who can read himself into the history and construction of a white settler place written in and on the landscape, I know that the story of here, of home, is one that I am/can be welcome into, one where my congruity with place, its politics and historical constitution offer me a sense of home. I can be home, then, if I choose to be.

This sense of a safe dis/similarity and a feeling of “homely” possibility is a complicated feeling. Deep down, I know that all of this is a white emotional indulgence; as a settler on these lands, I can navigate the affective space, comfortable knowing that my corporeal and legal safety is largely secure. This is only possible because of a settler-state commitment to a project of ontological homelessness through which Indigenous peoples and ideas of Country can be denied and violated to make space for those who have lived here for generations and those who just arrived. This project of denial creates a plausible home for white settlers by delegitimizing and erasing ontologies of land that diverge from Western liberal ideas of commodified, exploitable and “usable” land. Said differently, by controlling how land is managed, conceived and translated into settler place, the state can create a landscape that acts as a backdrop congruous with white migrant ideas of home, perpetuating the settler project and articulating it through new migrant experiences. For this reason, those of us who move across borders need to complicate how we negotiate new “homes” and the languages we use to normalize emplacement on the lands that serve as the sites of “home.” This latter point, considered in the second-half of the paper, is taken up through a critical engagement with the institutionalization of land Acknowledgments and Welcomes, languages and proclamations that make me critically question how my arrival and place on these lands remains Acknowledged and Welcomed in troubling ways. First, though, I take up the idea of home and its construction in relation to migration into and from a settler-colony.

Home and Homeless

Moving to Townsville from Toronto in February was, I was told with a gentle insistence, a challenge. As a city whose major employers – the university, hospital and military – all have rotations that occur in and around this time of year, the market for places to live can dry up quite quickly. Undeterred, I gave myself an ambitious timeline: I had two weeks from arrival to find and move into a place to live. I scoured the web, set up a litany of viewings and indirectly ended up exploring the city. Each time, I was greeted by a real estate agent or property manager who happily answered my questions and helped me navigate an unfamiliar rental terrain. As the two weeks were about to expire, the self-imposed pressure to find a place began to loom large, and I began to think about the prospect of being homeless in a foreign place. This, of course, was not a legitimate concern; my own deadline was artificial, and I had room in my moving expenses to extend my stay at the long-term hotel that I was currently living out of.

Growing up, my parents elected to move frequently; at its peak, moves were a yearly affair. I was, in this respect, a seasoned veteran in uprooting myself from a home and transplanting my own sense of place and home to a new house. This provided me with a

set of emotional and social skills to navigate the North Queensland rental space despite its (subtle) differences. I was, in this respect, comfortable in this ‘in-between homes’ space, for the narrative unfolding here was familiar: you are without a home, but one will come. Even an ocean away, I knew that I could find a place to make into a home for there was no shortage of places to live (even amidst a backdrop of low vacancy) and I knew that my skills and patience would be rewarded with a house that I (w/c)ould make into a home. I was right – nearing the end of my two weeks, I found a place and moved shortly thereafter. I was home...on someone else’s land.

Moving to Australia from Canada, I entered into a space of tension, one where ideas of home are entwined with and haunted by ongoing histories of colonial violence and ontological imposition. I entered taking for granted that home was a universal idea(l), a material and symbolic place where people can escape the social, professional and political commons, exercise a right to privacy and build lives with their family. The idea of a material and bounded space that guides such an idea is firmly grounded in a Western logic of home (Mallett, 2004), one predicated on property ownership, a state-constructed legal apparatus and ideas of place where people revel in being closed off from others.

This idea of home is premised on closures that, while perhaps personally and affectively meaningful, depend on disconnection from others outside the home and, in some cases, even from the space around where the home is made. Home, in this formulation then, is the result of selective solitude and a welcoming in of others when desired. In settler formations, this normative estrangement and deference to material space takes place on lands articulated through what Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2015) calls “white possessive logics” that naturalize white dominion. Schools, as purveyors of these logics, are complicit in anchoring these ideas of home against a backdrop of whiteness and history where new “frontiers” become places of homely creation and the resultant dispossession. I can be home here, then, because settler politics, history and geography conspire to make this a place that I have “rightful” access to, a learned feeling of belonging, and a place where ideas of (Western) home map on to what I understand them to be.¹ I can, in this regard, find a place to make home, to make mine.

In Australia, as in Canada, the normative circulation of settler ideas of home is possible because of deep investments in a project of enacting and securing ontological homelessness. As Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2003) argues, Indigenous peoples experience homelessness on a land where Indigenous ontologies of land conflict with white settler state ideas of dominion and a presumed historical inheritance of that very land across time and space. As an epistemic *a priori* (Moreton-Robinson, 2004), whiteness move(d/s) into Australia as a natural way of knowing that presuppose(d/s) the possibility of lands for homemaking, built around ideas of land and possession that started with James Cook’s wide-reaching declaration of lands empty of civilized peoples. Through systems of colonial violence, these ideas of new homelands came into

¹ I can appreciate that a retort here could be that I made the choice to implicate myself in this project and could just as easily remove myself. Leaving would result in obviating the tension and problems here but returning “home” implicates me back in the colonial project from whence I came (the Canadian one). Returning, then, is a choice to move back onto lands that are not mine and indeed, if I had stayed, it’s worth considering how staying would have been no less a choice. I will, however, concede and acknowledge that moving to a new settler context is qualitatively different in that I chose, with full awareness, to implicate myself in a colonial project as opposed to simply growing up in one and remaining. This distinction is what resulted in this paper.

existence, mappable onto emptied terrains for new arrivals to *Terra Australis*. For this to work, large scale and necessary ontological denials of Indigenous place and home were (and remain) required. All of this was and remains obscured by the “memorializing nation” and the perpetual efforts to write settler history into the lands as a technique of normalized possession (Mar, 2012) that rema(rk/ke) the lands as white possessions and thus subject to white settler ontologies of land.

It is worth, then, rethinking what it means to think of being without home, that is, homeless. Homelessness often gets imagined by state agencies and settlers as rather narrowly conceived in such a way that fails to appreciate the complexity of Indigenous ideas of home and its loss in a colonial context (Memmott & Nash, 2014). The state idea mirrors and naturalizes a Western conceptual imposition that often overshadows and excludes Indigenous ontological homelessness from consideration in favor of a simple conflation of “homeless” with “without material housing.” A careful balance needs to be made as fundamentally both an awareness of (a) the exclusion from material circumstances (i.e., houses) and; (b) the relationships with lands that are perpetually denied and violated, is required to fully understand homelessness in settler contexts (Christensen, 2017). This requires acknowledging that “home” and “homelessness” are also fundamentally about spiritual connection to lands, history and place just as it is and can be about materiality (Keys Young, 1998). In this respect, we need to imagine homelessness as “more than the absence of shelter”; the idea of having/not having a home is a “reductionism [that] confuses housing with home and thereby glosses over cultural, spiritual, and ideational meanings of ‘home’ as a secure place to be” (Geisler & George, 2006, p. 26).

What does this mean for settler migrant scholarship? To speak of new homes, old homes, or an ambivalent relationship across settler borders is to do so against a history of homelessness that makes such contemplations and affective negotiations possible. To work and live in new places and to engage notions of home requires us to witness the violence of a relationship to place that, “centres commodities over relationships, especially those which exist between the natural world and peoples” (Watson, 2014, p. 510). For myself, moving to Australia means working in relation to a history of colonial settlement whereby settlers sought to pacify “nervous landscapes” of racial difference and forge a new homeland built out of a history of dispossession (Byrne, 2003), a history that I have made the choice of entering into as a settler.

More broadly, as settler migrants who seek to work across borders, we necessarily must not only engage the historically specific constitution of “homed geographies” but must work against tendencies to ignore the projects of homelessness that make our trans-settler negotiations of new homes even imaginable and possible to begin with. Vacillating within a tension where we attempt to reconcile new places with old ideas of home demands a critical eye, one that refuses the historical obscurity required to make settlement seem legitimate. What this demands then, is a disruption of what it means to feel “settled” and what it means to make new homes in places defined through and out of normalized homelessness. For many of us, we are reminded of or asked to (implicitly) consider this in subtle ways through the increasingly pervasive reach of land acknowledgments, a recognition of land and its ontological layering that might recover the ontologies of land often neglected or displaced as settlers make new homes. This, however, is a complicated point of departure for critical work.

Acknowledge, Welcome, Place

“I acknowledge that today we meet on the lands of the Bindal and Wulgurukaba peoples, the Traditional Owners and custodians of these lands.”

On a frequent basis, I am bound to hear or see some iteration of this Acknowledgment in places around Townsville. A common fixture of public events, the Acknowledgement of both where we are, and whose lands, we work on often prefaces the discussion that follows. I don’t remember the first time I heard such an Acknowledgment, whether in Canada or Australia, but I know that this won’t be the last. These Acknowledgments have become fixtures of my professional life across spaces in Australia (and moments in my public/personal one) and are acts that evoke complex thoughts and feelings. On the one hand, the evocation of consideration that is spurred by such an Acknowledgment is hopeful, something that can surface the historical geography of this place as something more complex than just the settler geography of Townsville/Queensland/Australia. On the other, I find myself more frustrated with each passing Acknowledgment and the employment of it to meet a bureaucratic obligation. “I want to acknowledge the lands...” has become a statement that, for many, is undertaken as a point of necessity, potentially a strategy to pacify any guilt that one might have if they don’t do it or as a strategy to satisfy a social obligation. These Acknowledgments become reflexes, as instinctive as saying “how are you?,” something that results in me wondering if the Acknowledgement has been vacated of meaning. I sit in these spaces challenged – are we doing meaningful work here if the Acknowledgment is nothing more than the recitation of a scripted sentiment?

A common practice across Australia and Canada is the land acknowledgment, a practice in the former dating back to the early 1990s and a “belated recognition” of Indigenous place and history in the story of these lands that is worth recognizing (McKenna, 2014). Dempster (2007) argues that these Acknowledgments “may be both significant and effective, however full of ambivalence, because in the doing, in the action of giving voice to this simple set of statements, the incompleteness and failure of the colonising project of replacement is made explicit” (p. 92). The very recognition of colonial failure, in spite of the oft believed political, structural and imaginative completion of said project, does serve to call into question the narrative projection of settled place going forward. Grand historical narrative, in Australia and Canada, would have us believe that history begins with, is written through the eyes of, and is centred (almost monopolistically) on Europeans (except for multicultural readings which, St. Denis (2011) reminds us, is a function and productive of colonial practice), a storying that cements the idea of virgin lands being rescued by intrepid pioneers; this story, Acknowledgments (claim to) remind us, is fundamentally violent and contingent on the acceptance of a mistaken anchoring of history’s beginning point. Schools have long been complicit partners in the success of this flawed narrative; as institutions of the state designed to (in/ab)duct children into its imperatives, schools have long sought to enact replacement politics, settler-nationalist identification formation and a normalised commitment to a division of the world (Reid & Gill, 2010; Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013; Willinsky, 1998). Yet, in eras of reconciliation, it is these institutions that are most active in trying to centre and disrupt the failures of that which it has been (and continues to be) so heavily invested in.

Despite this, I can't shake the feeling of emptiness that often defines the articulation of this Acknowledgment and the impossibility of calling into consciousness a failure of replacement because of the common sequestering of settlers away from the requisite challenging work. Indeed, much like James Banks' (2004) "contributions approach" to multicultural inclusion in the classroom that fails to disrupt the fundamental structure of learning, repetitious and proclaimed Acknowledgments emptied of any reflection or action risk insulating settlers from the implied work being called for through an Acknowledgment.

Echoing such a call for recognition of land is often failed by the circumstances of the audience. Regardless of where the spaces are that I have heard or articulated one, I'm often amongst a group of people who are exclusively settlers. I leave such moments dismayed by the dispensing of what is often a formality.

I acknowledge the lands of the...

Acknowledge? Yes, but where is the call to action? The deafening silence of ethical follow-up results in an actionless recognition of place.

We are gathered on the lands of...

We are gathered on lands stolen, sites of dispossession, and ongoing violence; a condition of our gathering that is unacknowledged as if our gathering is innocent and happening on lands that have always been places of peace. Denied here in the often tepid recognition of gathering is a capacity to acknowledge that European ideas of possession help to curate a reality wherein ownership of land appears to have been naturally ceded, ideas of, as Irene Watson (2018) suggests, "extinguishment and associated actions [that] are not possible within our [Indigenous] ontology, worldview or laws" (p. 124). As a result, we are gathered on a space where two ontological realities exist while only one is meaningfully accepted.

As settlers in "institutions of empire" (Peters, 2019), I'm left wondering how effective an Acknowledgment can be if it doesn't also call for the institution's fundamental re-imagination. As neoliberal institutional formations that consume land and regulate its use, we do our work within settler fiefdoms where Acknowledgments can be and frequently are perfunctory, never critical and always strategically useful. Indeed, as Asher, Curnow and Davis (2018) argue, the expression of an Acknowledgment can often facilitate a turn to settler innocence, a process of ethical distancing that Tuck and Yang (2012) argue "relieve[s] the settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege, without having to change much at all" (p. 10).

Living in a time of reconciliation in Canada, I was confronted with facing an ontological reality that had largely been absent from my prior engagements with the foundations of (pedagogical) knowledge: recognition of history's impress on a present deeply shaped by projects of racist exclusion and violence that sought, in many respects quite literally, to kill Indigenous peoples and ways of knowing. Recognition (acknowledgment?) was not enough and I knew it. The feelings of anger, distrust in public memories of fantastical histories of mythic liberal progression and a consciousness of the allure of colonial mythologies for those (such as myself) who derived great benefit made developing a critical positioning an endeavour worth exploring. Part of this meant confronting and

identifying what Alissa Macoun (2016) precisely identifies as my own complicity in systems of white supremacy and the consequent possibility of a false belief that I am divorced from this system in my critical endeavours.

Moving to Australia meant re-calibrating my historical positioning anew. While whiteness rears itself as a global racial discourse (Leonardo, 2002), I entered into Australia making an effort not to simply map my critical understandings of the historical constitution of whiteness in Canada onto lands with a history that operationalise(d/s) whiteness in locally distinct ways. Yet, I can see that the nation-state, its expectations about rightful bodies and the percolation of this into the public memory and consciousness of the community is palpable and similar in form to the Canadian variety. Anywhere I go, I am welcomed by settlers into places that have been erected on lands not theirs, an act built on the implication that white settlers have the right to welcome me into a place, that is, to welcome me into their White fantasy (Hage, 2000). How can you welcome me here if this is not your land to welcome me to? This question is not answered here but there is a crack in the “wallpaper of whiteness” (Grant & Stanley, 2014) that complicates the gathering beyond an Acknowledgment. Here in Australia, in some places, I am Welcomed to Country by members of the local Indigenous community. In hearing the Welcome, I bear witness to members of the Indigenous community sharing an ontology of space and reminding those in attendance that this land is not just theirs but theirs to welcome us to. This is new to me as are the calls for those in attendance to think about place and the histories that make it intelligible; considered meaningfully, the Welcome is a call for ethical relationality (Donald, 2009). And while the “business as usual” often follows, the taken for granted monopoly over the geographic imaginary that whiteness commands is halted, however briefly. In this moment, I’m reminded that however much I may be welcomed home by colleagues and friends, I’ve rarely been welcomed to the space by those whose homelands I now work, live and try to make a home on.

Welcomes to a space are inherently distinct from an Acknowledgment of that same space. Whereas the latter often doesn’t call into question the colonising projects of dispossession but simply acknowledges the presence of settlers in/on place (without naming or critiquing it), the former demands that we consider how Indigenous ontologies about land exist in this space, refusing to fade away (as settler-colonisation would have it). Herein lies a key distinction: Welcomes call into question ideas of “ownership” or rights over space. Further, as Porter (2018) argues, “what is at work in these words is an invitation and response to be in a relationship, a sovereign relationship, with Country and its people” (p. 239). As someone living on Bindal and Wulgurukaba Country, an Acknowledgment of this simply recognises a history that can be abstracted away (as it often is when Acknowledgments become bureaucratic checkmarks in meetings) whereas a Welcome reminds me that I am in a relationship with Bindal and Wulgurukaba peoples and their Country.

I seek not to be naïve, for the work being done in a Welcome doesn’t possess a discursive, ethical or political power that helps it to elude the trappings of turns to settler innocence that Acknowledgments can facilitate (or demand depending on context). Much like the Acknowledgment, the Welcome can be accommodated by settler audiences because they can be read as symbolic, divorced from meaningful considerations of land claims and repatriation (Everett, 2009). Starrs (2014) is decidedly more pointed, noting that a critique of Welcomes is

that they can become moments, “whereby exotic peoples provide pleasurable experiences for non-Indigenous spectators” (p. 111), a claim I have certainly seen validated for it is often the settler who welcomes Indigenous peoples into the space to provide a Welcome and in so doing, they control when and where an audience is asked to engage with the Welcome.

While my reading of Welcomes here is suggestive of an ambivalent reading, there is work happening in the Welcome that allows for a different relationship to place, that renders conscious the historical impress of whiteness that has made efforts to deny Indigenous custodial relations and “homeness” in this place. The existence of white place as a layer in a geographic palimpsest is made more visible through the demands of the Welcome, that is, settler geographies do not replace but exist in relation to Indigenous lands and a Welcome draws attention to the foundational nature of Indigenous relationships to land. While an Acknowledgment might be able to do this, a Welcome, with its call to recognise relationality and the ontologies of land that continue to define Indigenous relationships to place, does more than “I [the settler] acknowledge” can.

Flying back between Australia and Canada now comes with a new responsibility. Flying from Turrbal & Yugara Country (Brisbane area) to the lands of the Mississauga of the Credit, the Anishnaabeg, Haudenosaunee, Wendat and Chippewa (Toronto area) continues to be a process heavily mediated by Australian and Canadian state authorities. I have flown back to Turtle Island on various occasions, greeted by the all too common retort by customs agents of “welcome home.” I remember that when I was younger, this seemed perfectly reasonable and provided me with the sense of comfort that comes with a familiar place, a familiar home. Welcomes to Country have given me a new relationship to this innocuous phrase and I’m left thinking of the customs agent “this is not your place to welcome me to.” This is even more complicated for me in Australia. Arriving back in Brisbane and eventually Townsville, I am arriving back on lands that I have chosen to (try to) make home and in so doing, I have consciously welcomed myself into a space and availed myself of the protections that come with the state’s implied welcome. In this respect, I may have been welcomed, but I’ve never been Welcomed to make a home in this Country.

Concluding: Transnational Settler Scholarship

I offer no concise resolution to the exploration offered above. At the same time, I want to avoid such a personal exposition becoming an indulgent look inwards at my own experience, and in so doing, re-centre the white subject in the decolonial enterprise. Rather, what I offer here are some thoughts on a privileged white migrant experience within and across settler contexts, particularly given that movement outside of one’s original settled context to another does not absolve one of responsibility. As Veracini (2010) reminds us, migrant can’t be understood as a uniform identification, that migrants exist along, “a spectrum of possibilities ranging between a move that can be construed as entirely volitional – the settlers’ – and a displacement that is premised on an absolute lack of choice [refugees]” (p. 4). The volitional nature of the scholarly flow and, in my case, the very whiteness that marks my body as hospitable to and congruous with the history, politics and culture of this place (while Veracini’s spectrum might position me as a migrant, I am often read as congruous with “settler” identity), inescapably means that all the work that I can do is rendered through an imaginary which makes my work negotiable and welcomed even when critical. For many of you, similar racialized expressions will mean that

your experience is mediated within similar political and historical relations requiring similar negotiations of (dis)similar settler projects.

While I offer two examples of transnational translations – the role of migrant scholars in the ongoing project of ontological homelessness and the induction into complicated discourses of Acknowledgments and Welcomes to/in new homelands – there is a more meaningful and enduring consideration to make. For those of us who have or will move across settler contexts, there is a necessary ongoing interrogation of how our movement is made possible by state systems that license, validate and protect our place on lands that have been, and remain, co-opted and regulated. Any work that we (i.e., white settlers) do across national bounds necessitates an awareness and meaningful consideration of hospitality, who has the capacity to make it so, and how we can relate critically and ethically to the places of our lives, work and love.

Last night, a piece of news made the headlines: the High Court of Australia ruled that a Gunggari and a Kamilaroi man, both with criminal records and both of whom are not Australian citizens, could not be deported under the Migration Act. Why? A central part of the case was whether Indigenous people who were non-citizens could be considered “alien” in the eyes of the law. I sat there, on the bus that morning, wrangling with the colonial work being done here, knowing that the logics of possession served to validate the construction of foreignness that legitimated the case as worth ruling on. I’m reminded here that not only is there a disavowal of Indigenous sovereignty but that there is a simultaneous application and deference to Western ideas of sovereignty which, as Wendy Brady (2007) argues, “is a power wielded between those who colonise” and in this case, the state and the judiciary (p. 147). Even though the epistemic, given that made this a legitimate case are not surprising, I was still struck by how violent this process was: two peoples’ place on their own lands was called into question because they were not registered as citizens in the eyes of the state. The state, here, asserted and guarded their right of determination, a right that allowed the judiciary and state to position Indigenous peoples as possibly “alien” (and indeed, three of the seven justices ruled that these men were indeed “alien”).

While reading this story, I couldn’t help but think about my place in Australia. On a work visa, I’m an alien labourer, one whose presence on these lands is surely more alien than these two men. Yet, I feel safe on these lands. As Takacs (1999) argues, “alien” means more than just foreign: “it also connotes an irreducible difference from the inhabitants of that soil” (p. 598); as a white English-speaking male who can speak the language of colonial logics, I have been constituted as a subject not really alien but rather as someone that can (appear to) be “of the soil.”

I get off the bus and continue my morning, dismayed, yet not surprised by what I just read transpire. I can’t help but put any semblance of tenuousness that my place in Australia as a visa holder has, into broader context: my ability to build a home here is better guarded than those who have called this land home since time immemorial. I’m home, but only because others are made to be homeless; a zero-sum ontological game of sovereignty ensures that my secure beginnings as a settler on these lands is paralleled by the continued efforts to end Indigenous homemaking. I may be home, then, but only because others cannot be.

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