CHAPTER 4

Settler Colonial Solutions to Settler Colonial Problems: Settler Cinemas and the Crisis of Colonization of Outer Space

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Settler colonialism is an ongoing reality in many places around the world, and accordingly, scholars have tended to emphasize its permanence as a structure shaping people's lives, framing histories, and determining power relations in societies (Wolfe 2001, 2006; Kauanui 2016; Tuck and Wang 2012; Veracini 2010, 2015; Lahti 2017a). Yet, failure and crisis are also integral part of settler colonization as a historical process, as are environmental crises such as the Dust Bowl in North America. Settler colonialism tries to master the land, use it, and derive bounty from it, putting tremendous strain on and wrecking environments. This chapter examines settler colonial crisis, failures, and responses by reading speculative fiction. It looks at how the recent blockbuster films *Ad Astra* and *Interstellar* tackle imaginary settler projects in outer space in the context of settler failures, environmental problems, and the precariousness of habitability. These films deal in varied ways with far-migration, settler quests for land and living space, and settler understandings and relations to the land. In short,

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typical settler colonial scenarios. They also discuss settler mindsets, instabilities, and the destruction of worlds, and their solutions and consequences. Put succinctly, they deal with settler colonial solutions to settler colonial problems, or, in other words, answers to settler colonial failures or potential failures. Thus, they address the precariousness of settler projects and how settler colonialism handles crises, how it reacts to problems of its own making, and what kind of solutions it envisions.

In *Interstellar* (dir. Christopher Nolan, 2014), the Earth is dying, the soil is exhausted, and the settlers are trying to cope with the calamity.[1] First, they try to change themselves, work collectively in conserving what remains and modifying their lifestyles to meet the worsening climate conditions. But they are failing, or, in another perspective, the planet is failing them. The crisis is seen as the fault of the planet no longer supporting settler lifestyles. Settler colonialism here is in denial that it is actually the cause of this crisis. In many ways, *Interstellar* addresses our most urgent current political question, global warming and the environmental crisis. But the solution it actually offers is more settler colonization. Environmental crisis is just another obstacle for the settlers to overcome without questioning their actions as settlers. In the process, the film dismisses the option of adjusting to the worsening conditions that the settlers' actions have caused. This kind of adjustment is useless. Regenerative practices or possible adaptations are deemed as failures. In fact, in the process of trying such measures, the settlers have instead lost their true selves. They have even denied their own heritage as pioneers; they shy away from their roots, they have canceled their own histories (censoring pioneer narratives in schools), and they have stopped searching for new lands. In a sense, they have stopped being settlers. Still, the Earth is finished; it can no longer support settler societies and merely offers misery and death in turn. So, the settlers need to rediscover their pioneer spirit and go to outer space to search for new lands to settle. And this is what takes place during the course of the film, a depiction of a dangerous, and ultimately successful, search to rediscover one's settler spirit and roots, and in the process one's settler future. All along, nature is an obstacle to overcome and to tame and control.

In *Ad Astra* (dir. James Gray, 2019), there is also a crisis, but its premises are different. The Earth is not failing, but the settlers seem to be. But not on Earth. Rather, their quest to search for new frontiers is threatening all life in the entire solar system. Furthermore, failure here is both personal, not collective, and ambivalent. The plot revolves around the

mysterious Lima Project, a settler venture to search for lifeforms and to study the potential for settlement in distant corners of our solar system. Something has gone wrong with the project, and contact with it has been lost. A generation later, the fate of the Lima Project remains unknown, while mysterious power surges crossing space suddenly threaten all human life. Settler existence on Earth, the Moon, and Mars is in danger. It seems as if the environment in outer space is becoming uninhabitable, that the solar system is repelling human settlement, and that a crisis of epic proportions is imminent. Yet, it becomes apparent that settler actions—in this case, individual actions, not settling as a collective endeavor—have spurred this crisis. The crisis is connected with the Lima mission.

In *Ad Astra*, settlers have already advanced to the Moon and to Mars and are inhabiting both places. Even Mars has adults who were born there. And as settlers, they are on the move, looking for more potential real estate to conquer and possible other intelligent life forms—and potential rivals—on these outer frontiers. While the whole settler world is facing a crisis, settler colonization as such is never in doubt—meaning there is no option of regenerative practices, or turning back, of retracting one's steps in the face of peril. Settlers are and remain settlers in search of new frontiers. They don't need to adjust, even in the face of a crisis. But the crisis still needs to be averted. And for that, one mad settler hero needs to be reined in. The narrative here is told as a descent into the heart of darkness as our protagonist goes in search of his estranged father, a settler hero who led the Lima Project, to the outskirts of Neptune. During the journey, he faces his own demons, confronts his father—a settler hero gone mad—and traverses a settler outer space that is mired with conflict, where people seem miserable and disillusioned. The settler space here is a forlorn space.

In both *Interstellar* and *Ad Astra*, the remedy for settler colonial crisis seems to be more settler colonialism: just keep on colonizing. This involves a denial of the fundamental problems settler colonization causes. Crisis is never seen as the fault of settler colonialism; there is nothing fundamentally/structurally at fault with the settler premise of taking and using more land. Instead, it is the land or an unstable individual that is the cause of problems. Calls for ever more expanding frontiers to colonize are the solution when settler ambitions clash with uncontrollable realities. These films show how settler projects refuse to end, to die out, or to turn back, and how settler colonialism rejects critical self-reflection in the face of human and environmental disasters.

Settler Colonial Trajectories in History and Film

Historically, settler colonialism refers to a distinctive form of colonialism where the settlers aim to replace the Natives/previous residents and capture terrestrial and maritime spaces with the intention of making them their own. It involves conquest, long-range migration, permanent settlement (or at least the intent of such), elimination of Natives, and the reproduction of one's own society on what used to be other people's lands. According to Patrick Wolfe's classic definition, settler colonialism differs from other forms of colonialism in that it is not primarily an effort to build a master-servant relationship interested in exploitation of Native labor or the extraction of natural resources but instead is more concerned about replacement and access to territory, the land itself. Wolfe underlined that as "settlers come to stay: invasion is a structure not an event" or a series of isolated events. It "destroys to replace," introduces "a zero-sum contest over land," and is characterized by a "logic of elimination," a sustained institutional tendency to eliminate the Natives who stand in the way of settlers' ambitions of making the land their own (Wolfe 2001, 868; Wolfe 2006, 388).

Settler colonialism has been integral to the making of a competitive, integrated, and interlinked global order in the modern period. In short, settler colonization stormed, altered, and remade much of the world, trampling Indigenous lands and turning them into settler spaces, and replacing Indigenous peoples with settlers. Settlers imposed their rule and seized land across North America, from Alaska to the Canadian Plains all the way to Newfoundland, and from California to Florida, the Pacific Northwest to New England. They did so also in Australia, New Zealand, southern Africa, and French Algeria, as well as in northern Fennoscandia. Other settler projects remade Latin America as its states sought to whiten their societies by bringing in more European settlers (Castellanos 2017; Taylor and Lublin 2021). Russian state-led settler colonization efforts remade the Caucasus and the Siberia, while Japanese settler colonialism penetrated Korea and Manchuria. Germans also initiated settler projects in the German-Polish borderlands and in Southwest Africa (Belich 2011; Lahti 2019; Fujikane and Okamura 2008; Uchida 2014; Lu 2020; Hennessey 2020; Blackler 2022; Cavanagh and Veracini 2017; Barclay 2018a).

Many of these settler invasions, and many others, acted as "settler revolutions," typically characterized by explosive colonization, supercharged,

exponential growth stemming from a synergy of ideological and technological shifts and following a cycle of expansion and integration (Belich 2011, 9). At the local level, the settler revolutions acted and felt more like shockwaves. They were networked, entangled, and co-produced mechanisms that altered the face of our planet. They carried tremendous human and environmental consequences, subjecting the land to excessive use, draining its resources and altering climates.

Settler colonialism also created global settler colonial cinemas with interlinked themes and joint narratives (Lahti and Weaver-Hightower 2020; Limbrick 2010; Columpar 2010; Veracini 2011). As a structure, settler colonialism needs to be continually reasserted and legitimized, as the settler's position on the land remains constantly challenged. The settler story must be recreated and retold because settlement is never fully accomplished. It is in this context that film as a genre and an industry developed, ascended, and morphed into the digital medium of the twenty-first century. Ever since their beginning, movies have captured and furthered the global settlement project, spreading its goals and normalizing its modes of domination when providing viewers with a recreation of the historic events of settlement (Weaver-Hightower and Lahti 2020, 3). Collectively, these films have juxtaposed and brought into contact different kinds of settlers with different kinds of experiences in different spaces. And in recent years scholars have interpreted these rich and diverse facets of settler cinemas, focusing on form, representation, reception, and production. Some have addressed urban settler environments, as in *Pépé le Moko* (dir. Julien Duvivier, 1937) set in French Algeria or in modern Taiwan in films such as *Home Sweet Home* (Jia zai Taibei, dir. Bai Jingrui, 1970) and *The Land of the Brave* (Long de chuanren, dir. Lee Hsing, 1981) (Flood 2020; Tsai 2020).

Arguably, the prototypical formula of settler cinema still remains the classic Western with the open spaces and its setting of Indigenous-settler encounters in those vast landscapes. The Western's key elements follow a logic of destruction, substitution, and rebirth, a settler colonial narrative built on the mutually constitutive process of elimination of Indigenous peoples and the setting up of settler families, enterprises, and communities on "virgin soil." The Natives are an obstacle the settlers need to ride over. They are incompatible with settler spaces; they need to make room, disappear, by force if necessary, or assimilate, change their ways. The settlers need to arrive at a particular destination, claim, occupy, and "settle" it to bring it under their "civilization." Many classic Westerns repeat this

formula or depict some aspects of it, none more so than the anthology *How the West Was Won* (dir. John Ford, Henry Hathaway, and George Sherman, 1962), showcasing a multigenerational saga of settlers sweeping the continent, reinventing the land, and giving meaning and identity to its peoples. In these classic depictions—including *The Searches* (dir. John Ford, 1956), *Bend of the River* (dir. Anthony Mann, 1952), *Red River* (dir. Howard Hawks, 1946), or *Wagon Master* (dir. John Ford, 1950)—the settlers struggle, but ultimately overcome obstacles. They tame the land, which is bountiful but also hard and demanding. Settlers build a connection to the land through their sweat and toil, and oftentimes through their blood. While the meeting of the settler and the wilderness creates a rough and violent temporary frontier, an outskirt of civilization, in the end, the settlers transplant their values, norms, and societies with them, and they and the land itself are remade and regenerated as a result of the settler colonial process (Lahti 2017b). It is these depictions of the march of civilization, the never satisfied appetite for new lands, that the Western has come to symbolize, while some Westerns also criticize the outcomes of this settler colonization process (Lahti 2020). Here, failure is not really an option. In a typical Western, there is no environmental crisis that would make the settlers question colonization.

Failure and Crisis in Settler Colonial Framing

But what about cinema and settler colonial failures? What types of failures are there in settler cinemas, and how are they addressed in films? As a narrative, settler colonialism rejects turning back or giving up. A typical colonial narrative, historian Lorenzo Veracini writes, has a "circular form" with a clear return, while a settler colonial narrative differs from this as it moves forward without a return (Veracini 2010, 96–98). Settler cinema is grounded on notions of forward advancement. Settlers travel, arrive, and carry their lifestyles, values, and sovereignty with them. The key ingredient of this kind of narrative structure is the settlers' quest to indigenize themselves. They both transform the environment by civilizing it, by making the place their own, and renew themselves to suit the land. They make claims that the land and the sacrifice and work they have put into this land have made them belong. This makes it hard for settlers to contemplate or confront failure. Settlers instead often commemorate select epic moments or struggles that work to establish their connection with the land. Often these moments relate to violence. As Mahmood Mamdani asserts, settlers

are made by conquest, not by immigration. They have arrived to replace the previous residents and the settlers remain settlers through continuous privilege and difference between them and the natives. Both initial replacement and ongoing dominance require and rest on violence, physical and discursive. Settler presence is meant to be for good (Mamdani 2015). Central here is the idea of permanence and belonging to the land. It is the settler who is at home and who makes the future. Until, that is, the settler is threatened with being kicked out, in real life or on the silver screen.

While settler rule remains firmly entrenched in North America and Australia, for example, it has, officially at least, been overturned in Africa. But what exactly happens when settler projects end, when settlers face failure, and how has this in turn resonated in settler cinemas? For one thing, there are different kinds of failures, stemming from political changes or environmental crises. Broadly speaking, there is the scenario of settlers being ousted by rival settler groups replacing the previous ones, or by decolonization, the liberation struggle of the previously subordinated Natives reclaiming their space. And there is also the scenario of the land becoming uninhabitable, as happened in the Dust Bowl in North America in the early 1900s (Holleman 2018; Worster 1979; Wunder et al. 2001). This led to settler exodus, settlers leaving the land, but not the repression of the settler colonial narrative. Elsewhere, decolonization would become a fresh start, with the settlers and their regimes now being replaced in turn. This was the case in French Algeria, where settler departure created lingering bitterness, longing, and nostalgia. The settler narrative refused to die, but much of its resonance was found in France, the destination of the evicted settler diaspora, not in the former settler colony itself (Hubbard 2015; Barclay 2018b). Much the same happened in Finnish Petsamo, where the period of Finnish settler colonization proved short-lived from the 1920s to the early 1940s. When Finland lost this land to the Soviet Union in 1944, all Finnish settlers needed to leave. Nevertheless, the memory of Finnish settler colonization lived on in Finland. Diaspora was perceived among the former settlers as an injustice, a forceful capture of the settlers' rightful homelands (Lahti 2021; Kullaa et al. 2022; Stadius 2021).

It is settler mobility that enables substitution of the Natives, initiates a new era, and constitutes a rite of passage necessary to legitimate the settler claim to the land through blood, tears, perseverance, and triumph. It is mobility that also is key to understanding the ways settler cinemas grapple, approach, and cope with failure, including environmental crisis. While

traditional Westerns seldom deal with giving up land as such, or of settler land dying, ghost towns form a key signifier of failure in Westerns, in films such as *Yellow Sky* (dir. William A. Wellman, 1948) or *The Law and Jake Wade* (dir. John Sturges, 1958). They are, after all, sites where settlement has ended, and from where settlers had had to leave. But these failures are not typically perceived as settler failures. Rather they stand for the land failing the settlers. The settlers had taken the land's bounty, usually minerals, until the land has run out. And then the settlers had gone elsewhere to do the same. Exhaustion of resources is seldom viewed as major existential crisis that would lead to questioning and rejecting the whole settler colonial premise. Ghost towns are rather viewed as testaments to settler energy and virility, showcasing the efficiency and skill that settlers can harness and use nature's bounty. Even when the land has failed the settler farmers, as in *The Grapes of Wrath* (dir. John Ford, 1940), and the individual settler is forced to leave his/her home, it is not the settler's fault, and there is little reason for self-critique. Rather than consider radical reorganization of settler lifestyles when facing the Dust Bowl, collective relocation remains the solution in this film. Facing crisis in film, settlers routinely relocate and find new Natives to replace and new lands to make their own—this is the foundational act that constitutes their volitional polities, as Veracini marks (Veracini 2020, 203). Flight somewhere else is thus hailed as a preferable solution to regenerative practices or possible adaptation to a changing environment, let alone acknowledging that the settler is the cause of environmental problems.

The Land Is Failing

Interstellar addresses a global environmental crisis as an existential crisis of a settler society. It focuses on the dire consequences of settler colonization as the land the settlers have appropriated is dying. But it refuses to see the crisis as settler-caused. Instead, it is the fault of the land. We witness this reality via a small community in heartland America forced to adapt. The protagonist, Cooper (played by Matthew McConaughey), is a farmer who hates farming. He is actually a prototypical frontier man: restless, individualistic, opinionated, and physical. He is also a former NASA pilot. The society he is forced to live in with his teenage son and daughter is very much focused on scaling down, on returning to the basics, on trying to understand the land and to survive on its terms. The need for higher education is reduced; there is no need for engineers, but instead the world

needs farmers when it is running out of food. History also has been rewritten, and, for example, the Moon landings are taken out of schoolbooks as falsifications, explained as merely constituting propaganda against the Soviets. The collective good trumps the individualistic settler spirit. The societies on Earth form some kind of a collective organizational system, a world government, and there are no armies anymore. Yet the crisis is acute and relentless. Blight has taken wheat some years before, okra is also gone. There is only corn left, but it will soon also die. There seems to be no way out. It is clear that this austerity and adjustment is failing. Or it is clear to people like Cooper who still embody the old pioneer spirit. Cooper feels that "we have forgotten who we are. Explorers, pioneers, not caretakers." The system has stifled the pioneer spirit; it has denied all vision of expansion and grandeur, of innovation, and of settling.

There is a key scene early on in the film that shows how surviving environmental crisis through communal action, by scaling down, is not working. During a baseball game, a massive dust storm sweeps the community, and people evacuate in the wail of alarm sirens. Blowing winds take off the topsoil, causing suffocating dust to invade everywhere, including our protagonist's home. It looks very much like the beginning of the end for Earth as a wave of ever more violent storms loom on the horizon for humankind. Settlers need to abandon their home, the Earth, and find a new home. While the majority of settlers who have lost their way refuse to see this, Cooper does not. His beliefs get confirmed as Cooper stumbles on a secret NASA base, where he learns that dust storms and failing crops will soon render humanity incapable of surviving on Earth. But NASA has been proactive, working in secret. Since staying put is not an option, two plans have been drawn up. The first option concerns removing as many people from immediate danger to seek refuge in an orbiting space station (although how to actually do this, to send the ark into orbit is as of yet unknown, but by the movie's end the gravitational equation is resolved, and NASA's space ark helps save humanity from immediate danger). The second option, the Lazarus Project, revolves around colonizing another planet with selected human material—sending frozen embryos out, terraforming, and repopulating. NASA has already earlier launched twelve ships to scout twelve possibly suitable worlds in outer space for humanity's next home. Of these twelve exploratory manned missions, three have activated their beacons, meaning they have found something meriting further investigation. Cooper is lured to join this mission, to investigate these

beacons. Abandoning his life on and family on Earth, he goes to find new pastures to settle.

As Veracini remarks, *Interstellar* outlines a markedly settler colonial solution to crisis—"if the land turns against you, appropriate another." Indeed, the proposed remedy is not regenerative practices or possible adaptation, a change of lifestyles and a fundamental reordering in the understanding of the land (Veracini 2020, 204). No, the settlers' relationship to the land is never questioned. Instead, the proposed solution is to abandon the dying planet and seek new ones to settle. As the leader of the Lazarus Project, Professor Brand (Michael Caine) puts it, "We're not meant to save the world, we're meant to leave it." With this solution, the settler is not expected to change his/her outlook on land or to even question settler identity and practices. Rather, in order to survive, the current generation needs to return to the pioneering settler spirit of the previous generations, who originally settled these lands on Earth and put them to use. The current generation needs to rediscover its true settler spirit.

Cooper sets out on an epic journey to save the future of humankind, in this case, settlerkind. Initially his quest in outer space seems to result in failure as he passes through a wormhole into another galaxy with a planetary system orbiting a supermassive black hole called Gargantua. The hopes and dreams of new settler colonies are crushed by the harsh realities of the environments he encounters. Following the beacons, Cooper and his crew first seek out new settler futures on a watery planet where giant tsunami waves regularly crush everything in their path. There is no land there, and thus no settler futures. They next land on an icy, snow-covered planet where they encounter the previous explorer NASA sent, Mann (Matt Damon). It turns out that Mann has gone mad, falsifying data to get NASA to rescue him. He orchestrates a violent episode, seeking to hijack Cooper's spaceship, but fails. Regardless, it has become obvious that this planet too is unsuited for settler life. There is no surface, no air to breathe, and no future.

Ultimately, Cooper discovers a solution and returns to the new city in the sky, the secret NASA ark that by now has been launched to space. It sustains human life while a suitable new planet for settlerkind is also found. During his search for a new settler home, Cooper has also rediscovered his true self. He is a true explorer and pioneer and cannot permanently remain in the NASA ark on what is left of the Earth. Rather, the new frontier and its freedom beckon him. He needs to be at the forefront of the settler project. Cooper ventures to the new planet and joins the first pioneers in

its settler colonization. It is a tough environment, but it awaits the settlers to take over, to tame the land, and to make it their own. Much like the older generations once did with their wagon trains on Earth.

In the end, humanity is on its way to new settler destinies. But it might also be on its way to wrecking new planets, to exhausting new environments. Earth is done for; now other planets stand in front of the settlers' insatiable gaze. Surely they will be exhausted eventually too. But the remedy is also there, now firmly established, to go search for new planets to consume. Settler colonization is truly never-ending.

Into the Heart of Darkness

In *Ad Astra*, the Lima Base is a settler outpost where things have gone terribly wrong. Not only can the mysterious power surges crossing space that suddenly threaten all human life be traced to it; already earlier some of the explorers in the Lima mission wanted to turn back, resulting in violence and tragedy. Their leader, H. Clifford McBride (Tommy Lee Jones), the famous settler hero revered across the world, refers to this attempt to turn back as "mutiny," to which he had responded by killing the mutineers. At some later point, closer to the present, even those faithful to Clifford had turned against him, with equally devastating consequences. There simply is no room for turning back in settler colonization. All this information Clifford shares with his son, the protagonist, Roy McBride (Brad Pitt). As the two finally meet after many years (in the last third of the movie), Clifford is all alone at the Lima space station. He is a man torn by his violent actions and his own stubborn quest to colonize and explore. He is vacillating between feelings of failure and desperation and mania to push onward, to explore new frontiers in search of intelligent life. He claims he is on a "one-way voyage," a man on a mission, a man with a destiny. He blames the others in his original group of cowardice, as lacking the necessary motivation and determination to do the hard work that colonization requires. They had caused the failure by wanting to return, by not believing in their mission. It is evident that Clifford is actually a man made insane by his colonial mission.

Like Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's famous colonial novel *Heart of Darkness*, the outlandish greed, unrestrained dreams, catastrophic failures, and extreme horrors tied with the colonization have done Clifford in. He has no way to go, no redemption, and no return. He is a man utterly alone and broken by his own mania over colonization. Even meeting up with the

son he abandoned years ago can only bring temporary solace. For a brief moment, Clifford and Roy seem to bond, to share a mindset, and to dream of discoveries. But Roy soon recognizes how his father is so lost in his own mind and obsessed with finding new lifeforms that he cannot appreciate what he has already mapped and collected data on, the seemingly empty places on the outer edges of our solar system. In his contemplation, Roy seems to imply that what his father had indeed found were empty spaces, terra nullius, more potential spaces for the settlers to claims as theirs, exploit resources from, and possibly even inhabit in some form or another. While this is merely implied, between the lines, the film seems to suggest that the lack of other intelligent life forms might actually be a good thing, as these unoccupied spaces are available for humans to take over.

If Clifford is Kurtz, the great colonial hero gone crazy, sick, and irredeemable, then Roy is Marlow, Conrad's alter ego. While Conrad worked as a riverboat captain in 1890 for a Belgian trading company in King Leopold II's Congo, his novel from 1899 depicts a journey to the soul of European colonization in Africa, to a cruel savage terrain where violence permeates interpersonal and intergroup relations. Marlow embarks on a mission and heads deep inland, upriver. He is to reach the station of the prodigy of the European trading company, the renowned yet mysterious Mr. Kurtz. Kurtz is referred to as a prophet-like figure with great intelligence and grand designs. However, Kurtz has been cut off from communications and feared to have fallen gravely ill. As Marlow reaches Kurtz, he finds a fanatical, dying visionary who has made himself a god-like figure among local tribes (by introducing manufactured weapons) and raided the countryside for ivory. Kurtz has created a death zone in the heart of Africa. Yet, Marlow still speaks of the dying Kurtz as a great man, a highly intelligent pioneer of sorts, albeit of a deranged and lethal kind whose soul had gone mad (Conrad 1899; Jasanoff 2017).

Conrad's work remains possibly the best-known work of fiction dealing with colonial violence. In *Ad Astra* there is a similar kind of journey, a descent into darkness, but this time in colonized outer space. Roy is sent to open contacts with his father, to message him from Mars. And that is all he is meant to do. The purpose of this secret mission, not revealed to Roy by Spacecom, the colonial space company, is to actually eliminate Clifford and to stop the mysterious power surges by sending in a strike force to nuke the Lima Base. But Roy actually ends up going to meet his father in person, going against his orders by capturing a space shuttle in Mars and

venturing alone to confront Clifford. This happens when he starts to realize there is something wrong with Clifford and that he needs to sort it out personally. Before that Roy travels through a bleak and unforgiving colonial terrain, much like Marlow does. He himself is also lost when starting the mission. Roy is unemotional, disillusioned, and estranged from those closest to him on Earth. In short, Roy is an alienated, anxious man who has lost his purpose and will to live. But through his mission, he regains his life powers. He gains redemption by confronting his father, the great explorer and pioneer hero gone crazy, and by putting an end to the surges, putting the colonization project back on track from the brink of disaster.

When Roy lands at the Moon, the first stop on his journey, he enters a commercialized and commodified colonial space, catering to tourists and capital. While the official marketing slogan on the hangar promotes Moon as a place "Where the World Comes Together," in reality it is a scene of settler conflicts. The Moon is a war zone, a battleground between different settler factions, with rebels ominously dubbed by the establishment as "pirates." They are the Native Americans to the white settlers. The situation is even referred to as such: "It's like the Wild West out there," one Moon resident states, referring to spaces outside the main settlement. When Roy is transported to his outgoing space shuttle on the dark side of the moon and needs to cross "no man's land," his crew is attacked by these pirates. It is done in a very classic Indian attack style, copied from John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939) and numerous other Westerns. Pirates charge after the moving space vehicles that Roy is being transported in, chasing them across barren lunar plains. Roy is saved by the "cavalry," in this case firing from base that repels the attackers. Like in many classic Westerns, no explanation to why these pirates act the way they do is given. What motivates them, what has caused the hostilities remains a mystery. There is simply competition over resources and land. Violence is in fact represented as an ordinary circumstance, as part of the settler colonial everyday, as part of the process of replacement where settlers eliminate their rivals and make the land their own. Clearly, this process is still unfinished on the Moon. Rather the Moon is rife with conflicts settler colonization has brought.

As Roy leaves the Moon behind him, the audience learns how humans are "world eaters," who explore, take, and consume all they can. Next up is Mars, the "last secure hub we have" as one colonizer calls it. In its underground settler society, some 1100 people live in a bleak, concrete world. There is no sun, air, or flowers, except in artificial simulations

projected on walls inside the compound. Mars seems much like a wasteland, a last outpost on the settler frontier. And it is not a happy family settlement, or a thriving frontier town we have seen in so many old Westerns. It is barely hanging on, almost a ghost town already, although it has adult settlers who are native-born in Mars. People there seem scared, lonely, and lacking a sense of purpose. "Is it really worth saving?" is a question Roy never voices. Instead, he goes to save it and the whole settler world. As Clifford spirals to his demise in open space, Roy destroys the Lima project and stops the surges. He makes it back home to Earth to live a happier life than before. Like Cooper in *Interstellar*, he too has gained his true identity through his daring adventure in space in the service of settler futures.

Conclusion

At the end of these two films, settler worlds are saved, reinvigorated, and reenergized. Settler colonization is alive and well. Through their continual replaying and retelling of settlement stories films like *Interstellar* and *Ad Astra* keep on reminding all that settlement is never finished, but constantly ongoing. They have affirmed settler colonialism's refusal to die. *Ad Astra* and *Interstellar* provide a window to the settler mindset and identity, what is essential about settling. They speak to a common, international, audience, and use a shared "language" of settler colonialism in doing so: the stories of empty lands, settler civilizations and righteousness, and of forward advancement and exploration. *Ad Astra* and *Interstellar* comment on these settler colonial themes of land use and environmental crisis. They reaffirm and play with typical settler colonial narrative outcomes, the themes of settler arrival, quest for land and family, ongoing settlement, and displacement. While *Ad Astra* provides some critical commentary of settler actions as "world eaters," neither film seriously questions the settler colonial logic, let alone promotes the end of settler colonization. *Interstellar* openly advances the move for further settler colonization, endlessly, while *Ad Astra*, by saving settler space from doom, normalizes settler colonization as an imperfect but normative state of the human condition. Advancing forward is what the settler, and thus human society, is all about.

Note

1. My reading of *Interstellar* owes much to Lorenzo Veracini's excellent study of *Interstellar* and *Cowboys and Aliens* (2020).

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