Position Paper - Terra Critica Meeting 2023
Terra Critica X Rural Imaginations

University of Amsterdam
Veenhuizen/Amsterdam, 14-17 June 2023

Timothy O'Leary

I want to engage with two of the questions that we were asked to consider for this Workshop. "What is the critical potential of so-called peripheral places, often conceived as extractive hinterlands, or of the more-than-human lives they harbour?" And "What critiques are emerging from the rural, from the wilderness, from the land of indigenous traditions?"

Rather than trying to answer these questions directly, however, I want to proceed on the premise that, as a scholar who endeavours to be, in some sense, "critical" and therefore "self-critical", I need to give an account of my own position in relation to the context of these questions. That context being the longstanding and ongoing forces of exclusion, expropriation, extermination, (im)plantation, and terraforming that have shaped large parts, if not the entirety, of the contemporary social, political, and natural world. But first, an overview of our two key readings.

The texts by Raymond Williams (1973) and Amitav Ghosh (2021) each illuminate one facet of the long history of European colonisation, as it spreads from what Williams refers to as "the home islands" (285) [a problematic term that I won't take up here] to Ghosh's focus on the Banda Islands in the Indian Ocean, with occasional reference in each text to the even more 'distant' colonised island that is now known as Australia. For Williams, the march of European colonialism was preceded by an earlier, internal 'colonialism' — that which accompanied the enclosure of the commons, urbanisation, and the creation and subjection of the rural in its function as extractive hinterland and idyllic retreat. This process was also accompanied by the first colonial incorporations of Wales, Scotland, and Ireland, in a period that Jane Ohlmayer refers to as the English Empire in contrast to the later British Empire.[1] Williams' argument is that this relation between the metropolitan and the rural is economically and socially reproduced on a larger scale in the colonial relation between the metropolis and the colonies and continues today in the structures of globalised extractive capitalism. It is a set of relations that, he suggests, brings with it a "terrifying" crisis (288) that can only be averted through "revolutionary change" — the impetus for which must come from within the "metropolitan countries" (288) themselves. The one glimmer of hope, in face of this crisis, is the possibility that "we" can read the literature of the new rural (colonial and postcolonial) societies as expressing a "common experience" that "we" [British? Europeans?] have already gone through in the process of urbanisation.

[1] Jane Ohlmeyer, "James Ford Lectures 2021: Ireland, empire, and the early modern world", here: https://www.history.ox.ac.uk/event/the-james-ford-lectures-2021-ireland-empire-and-the-early-modern-world

Amitav Ghosh, writing some fifty years after Williams, addresses the same crisis at a time when it has crystallised into a climate crisis that can no longer be averted, but at best mitigated. The perspective Ghosh brings to the crisis and its origins is immediately more multi-perspectival than that of Williams. Ghosh, an Indian scholar, situates himself writing in Brooklyn during the early months of the Covid pandemic, while using Google translate to access Dutch-language documents that trace the experience of a small group of islands in the Indian Ocean in the seventeenth century. For Ghosh, the salient feature of the history of European colonisation and its connection to our current terrifying crisis, is that colonisation was always a form of "biopolitical warfare" (31), one that targeted human populations as much as natural systems and engaged in a multi-generational project of *terraforming*. The fate of the Banda Islands and the nutmeg tree is one example of that process; and Ghosh suggests the islands can be read as "a template for the present" (21).

If Williams begins with the processes of the creation of the rural and the early "English Empire" within the islands of Great Britain and Ireland, and Ghosh identifies a small group of islands in the Indian Ocean as a template for the present, then my own personal trajectory has followed a similar path: from Ireland to Australia, with a long sojourn in a former British colonial island outpost that is not too far from the Banda Islands; that is, Hong Kong. Focusing on the start and end point of this trajectory, I have been increasingly aware in recent years of the complete reversal I have undergone in terms of my (imaginary and real) relation to colonisation. In Ireland, at least when I was growing up in the 1970s and 1980s, it was impossible not to be aware of the realities of the ongoing impact of colonisation, especially its settler-colonial variety that was practiced as a first experiment by the English in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century – most successfully in the counties that, since 1921, have constituted Northern Ireland. Those settler-colonial "plantations" had been commenced in the early 1600s, in a process in which Scottish and English Protestants were given the confiscated lands of Irish chieftains. At the end of the twentieth century, their legacy continued to distort the fabric of Northern Irish life, with all its sectarian violence and cultural atavism. I grew up in the Republic of Ireland, in a town about an hour south of the border, where our children's television shows were regularly interrupted with police announcements about incendiary bombs and attacks.

But it wasn't just the violence of the Troubles in the 1970s and 1980s that pressed this reminder, it also existed at a very deep cultural level. To take one example, the Irish language (*Gaeilge*) was a central part of the school curriculum throughout my primary and secondary schooling. Like many Irish children at the time, in my early teens I attended summer camps in a *Gaeltacht* (Irish speaking) village. In my case, this was in Coolea in West Cork, quite close to my father's family farm in Rathmore County Kerry and, as I discovered much later, close to the last castle held by an O'Leary chieftain, in Inchigeelagh, County Cork (Carrignacurra Castle, c.1575). As a child who was growing up in a small town, these regular stays in rural, sometimes Irish-speaking areas reinforced my awareness that Ireland's pre-colonisation culture was linguistically, legally, and socially distinct, both from the culture and language of the English and from the largely modernised and urbanised culture of Ireland as I knew it. Even as a child, I think I was aware of the enormous, paradoxical, sometimes futile, cultural effort to revive and/or maintain as much of that culture as

possible, while also watching English television, following English soccer teams, and enjoying the Eurovision Song Contest. But underlying this awareness of the contradictions and, frequently, small-minded narrowness, of these revivalist attempts, there was never any doubt on which side of colonisation I stood. I was part of a culture that had been, in very fundamental ways, destroyed by English colonisation. And yet, a distinctive Irish culture, expressed in music, literature, and sport had survived, especially but not exclusively in rural areas. By the mid-1980s, when I was a university student in Dublin, it was clear to me that Ireland's future lay in a hybrid culture that celebrated its unique features within the European project, embodied at that time by the EEC.

Since returning to live in Australia in 2018, I have been much more aware of the ongoing impact of colonisation on First Nations people than I was during my first stay in Australia in the 1990s. In recent years, each time I give an Acknowledgement of Country at the start of a university event, I am struck by the fact that regardless of my own cultural identity and imaginary relation to colonisation, I now structurally occupy the role of settler-migrant in a land that was violently stolen from its traditional custodians under the principle of *terra nullius* (unowned/unoccupied land). Ironically, and extraordinarily, this same principle was invoked during the plantation of Ulster in the early 1600s (because traditional Irish forms of land tenure under Brehon Law did not conform with English law). To make the shift from imaginary identification as historical victim of colonisation, to being the actual beneficiary of a more recent colonisation is jarring. Uttering the prescribed words of an Acknowledgement of Country, in which one recognises the traditional custodians of the land on which one works and lives (for me, these are the Bidjegal people), no matter how authentically expressed and deeply felt, always seems to be a blindingly inadequate response to ongoing injustice.

This sense of inadequacy gives rise to two challenges, that intersect with the central concerns of our Workshop. First, what kind of belonging in this country is available to me, as a new citizen who benefits from a settler-colonial system that is built on ongoing injustice and inequality? Second, how, if at all, should these practical realities of my life inform my work as critical philosopher?

In relation to the first question, that of belonging, I want to build on the insights provided in the Mishuana Goeman text (2015) which explores certain Indigenous understandings of "land" that defy and go beyond Western legal concepts of property and ownership. To think about this in the context of Australia, I will refer to the work of feminist social theorist and Goenpul woman, Aileen Moreton-Robinson. In Moreton-Robinson's *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty*,[2] she argues that in Australia there is a fundamental and unbridgeable divide between the form of belonging experienced by First Nations peoples and that of settler-migrant peoples. As in Goeman's text (71), Moreton-Robinson refers to the unique understanding and experience that First Nations people have of their relation to the lands on which they live. In Australia, the most common term used by First Nations people to refer to lands and waterways is "Country". The First Nations not-for-profit organisation Common Ground explains it like this:

[2] Moreton-Robinson, Aileen. 2015. *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty*. U of Minnesota Press.

> Country is a proper noun, which is why it is usually capitalised. We often refer to Country in the same way we would a person. For example, Country is sick. Listen to Country. Country needs time to heal…Country encompasses land, waterways, seas, and skies, as well as the energy and space in between. It also encompasses relationships. Relationships with plants, relationships with animals and relationships with Ancestors… '*First Nations people are intrinsically entwined and connected to Country. We are inherently a part of our natural ecosystems where bloodlines run deep into our land and oceans. We must protect Country so that Country can protect us' (*Kulkalaig woman, Tishiko King).[3]

For Moreton-Robinson, this relation constitutes an "ontological relationship to land" (11) that differs from "non-Indigenous belonging based on illegal dispossession" (4). The ontological relationship to land of Indigenous peoples is one that cannot be shared or alienated; it is primary and fundamental, and it is permanently closed to settler-migrants. She argues that settler-migrant accounts of belonging, focussed as they are on "sentiment" and individual feelings about land and place, are problematic because of their "denial of the racialized structural power relations that have produced the legal conditions in which this sentiment is possible, enabled, and inscribed" (7). It is worth noting that Moreton-Robinson also recognises that settler-migrants are a highly diverse group, especially in Australia. However, even while acknowledging that, for example, English, Scots, and Irish have their own distinctive cultural experiences of colonisation and imperialism, she makes the incontrovertible point that "in the Australian context, whiteness confers certain privileges" (9).

The question for me, then, as an Irish settler-migrant in Australia, is how do I respond to the challenge of building a form of belonging that acknowledges the primacy of First Nations belonging and recognises the ongoing injustices and inequalities of dispossession? I will indicate two promising paths. First, there are many examples of Indigenous elders and leaders making the extraordinarily generous offer of cultural participation to non-Indigenous Australians. For example, the Aboriginal activist Charles Perkins, speaking to his biographer Peter Read:

> My expectation of a good Australia is when White people would be proud to speak an Aboriginal language, when they realise that Aboriginal culture and all that goes with it, philosophy, art, language, morality, kinship, is all part of their heritage. And that's the most unbelievable thing of all, that it's all there waiting for us all. White people can inherit 40,000 or 60,000 years of culture, and all they have to do is reach out and ask for it.[4] (Read 1990, 315)

Of course, this doesn't mean that 'White people' can reach out and *take* it. It requires reaching out to *ask*, to take the time to invest in learning language, to educate

[3] https://www.commonground.org.au/article/what-is-country

[4] Read, Peter. 1990. *Charles Perkins: A Biography*. Viking Press.

oneself, and to acknowledge the owners of cultural knowledge; that is, to proceed slowly and with humility.

The second promising path is through allyship. Many Australian First Nations organisations, including Common Ground whose website I cited above, approach the dichotomy of Indigenous and settler-migrant belonging by being (cautiously) open to allyship from settler-migrant people, whether they are farmers, mining companies, donors, or ordinary citizens. One essential condition for genuine allyship, however, is acknowledgement of the facts of dispossession and the difference in ontological relationship to land/Country. Even more challenging is Moreton-Robinson's insistence that "there can be no equal partnership while there is illegal dispossession" (7). Perhaps genuine allyship cannot occur until Treaty and constitutional change have been brought about. Mere acknowledgements on their own, including institutionally endorsed Acknowledgements of Country, are an insufficient basis for allyship. Yet, in the meantime, many forms of action are open to individuals, from donating time and money to educating oneself about the history and impacts of dispossession.

In my case, there may also be a third path, one that intersects with the questions our workshop is exploring. This would require thinking about new possibilities of critique that are emerging from "so-called peripheral places", from "the rural…from the land of indigenous traditions". This path would require me to think about how my personal context, as described here, could or should inform my academic work, both within the institution of the university and as a researcher/writer. That is, what difference should there be between the work I did thirty years ago and the work I do today? For the moment, I will leave that question unanswered.