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The Meaning of Settler Realism: (De)Mystifying Frontiers in the Postcolonial Historical Novel

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An unexpected moment occurs midway through Georg Lukács' story of the

development of literary realism in *The Historical Novel.* Having explained why Sir Walter

Scott's romances constitute modern literature's first instance of true historical consciousness,

Lukács turns his attention to those subsequent writers who supposedly developed, modified,

or betrayed Scott's legacy: Europeans like Balzac, Manzoni, and Tolstoy. His list includes

one American, James Fenimore Cooper. Lukács praises Cooper's 1820s "Leatherstocking"

cycle for its "large and broad historical perspective" on North American colonialism, and

argues that his novels reveal how "immediate economic contrasts and the moral ones arising

from them grow organically out of everyday problems" – terms of high critical approbation

for Lukács (*Historical* 64-65). Yet Lukács' liking for Cooper is oddly ambivalent. Noting

that on the frontier the contradiction between capitalism and indigenous life-ways "was posed

far more brutally and directly by history itself" than in Europe (*Historical* 64), Lukács

suggests that Cooper's narrative is almost *too* accessible to be aesthetically good, declaring

that "the directness and straightforwardness of the social contrast" leads to "an

impoverishment of his artistic world" (Lukács *Historical* 64). Lukács thus implies that

Cooper's books are marred by their subject matter. The frontier is too *obvious* a subject for

fiction, he suggests, its conflicts so readily apparent that they resist aesthetic manipulation

(see Esty 'Global' 368). So Cooper achieves a "wonderful and tragic embodiment" of "one of

the great contradictions of mankind's journey of progress" (*Historical* 65), but cannot reach

the heights climbed by Scott and Balzac; his colonial world is just not conducive to realist

representation, populated as it is by characters who are "represented schematically, with

superficial psychology and a monotonous and forced sense of humor" (*Historical* 64). If you

want novels – truly *realist* ones – you have to look to the place where real history happens.

Or so Lukács seems to think.

It would be easy to dismiss this attitude as the "manifest Eurocentrism" (Esty 'Global' 366) it clearly is, a case of the "colonialist criticism" excoriated by figures – now far more famous than Lukács – like Chinua Achebe ('Colonialist Criticism'). But I think it is more interesting to take Lukács' argument seriously, and consider whether there is indeed something about settler-colonial literature that is at odds with conventional theories of realism. In this article I suggest that those theories can be broadened and complicated by a shift in focus to literary works that narrate, from colonists' points of view, the occupation and repopulation of foreign lands. Described variously as the "settler's plot" (Calder), "settler dreaming" (Turner 'Settler Dreaming'), or "allegories of settlement" (Dalley), such narratives circulate in societies founded on the expropriation of indigenous peoples, as has occurred in, for example, the Americas, Africa, Australia and New Zealand – the latter two of which provide this article's case studies. I argue that settler-colonial fiction constitutes a subset of the modern novel that inflects realist representation in theoretically-significant ways. Directing our attention to literatures of the frontier requires us to complicate our understanding of the links between the novel and historical consciousness. My principal claim is that while Lukács' theories of realism are undoubtedly blinkered by Eurocentrism, they nonetheless offer a useful framework for exploring how formal-aesthetic variations in settler-colonial realism can be understood as differing responses to the representational tensions of frontier history. Moreover, I argue that one of Lukács' critical distinctions – between reifying "naturalism" and critical "realism" – provides a tool for elucidating varying modes of settler-colonial historical consciousness. I illustrate these points through a comparison of the work of Eleanor Catton, from New Zealand, whose *The Luminaries* won the Booker Prize in 2013, and Rohan Wilson, of Australia, whose *The Roving Party* (2011) and *To Name those Lost* (2014) pose an alternative history of Tasmania. I show how the

specificities of settler colonialism require us to jettison linearity in narrating the history of the novel. By recognizing settler-colonial society as a distinctive form of modernity, we can reconceptualise literary realism as a mode of historical consciousness that is at once entangled with the aestheticization of social contradictions – as Lukács believed – and that develops according to globally differentiated temporalities.

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The idea of a postcolonial "return to Lukács" (Sorenson 57) – the application of his ideas to the literature of non-metropolitan contexts – has engaged a number of critics recently (Lazarus; Sorenson; Andrade; Dalley). Any such transposition must grapple with the intrinsically Eurocentric substructure of Lukács' work (Esty 'Global' 366), not to mention his normative commitment to concepts of totality (Cascardi) that sit uncomfortably with postcolonial and settler-colonial studies. As the example of Cooper shows, Lukács perceives realism to be an aesthetic response to *advanced* modernity; for him, it works best when "simple" (*Historical* 64) contradictions like those of the (raced) frontier have been absorbed and partly sublimated into class formations – but before the intoxication of high bourgeois civilization has taken hold. His theory is temporally progressive. For him, Cooper's work is interesting but peripheral because the frontier represents a primitive stage of capitalist development, one already superseded elsewhere. This assumption is clearest in his characterisation of Cooper as a grand narrator of "mankind's journey of progress" (*Historical* 65).

Yet reframing Lukács from a postcolonial perspective is not as counterintuitive as it seems. His account of realism in *The Historical Novel* builds on the aesthetic first proposed in *The Theory of the Novel* (1920), which presents the genre as a formal compensation for the consciousness of totality lost as the world becomes more complex, globalized, and fragmented – processes that undoubtedly include the territorial extension of empire (Jameson

'Modernism'). In this broken world, art manifests the gap between representation and reality. "[N]o longer a copy" of the real itself (Lukács *Theory* 37), the novel is a constructed alternative to it, "a created totality" (Lukács *Theory* 37) that manifests both the desire for, and impossibility of, understanding historical existence as a whole. Lukács subsequently defines the loss of totality as a product of reification and the mystification of consciousness that occurs when the commodity-form becomes universal. Capitalism's "world of objects and relations between things" appears natural to those inside it, who see themselves governed by "invisible forces that generate their own power" and struggle to perceive them as effects of class oppression (Lukács *History* 87). Lukács defines realism as the mode of representation that demystifies this order by identifying connections and processes, penetrating the veil of reification to explicate underlying forces (Lukács 'Balance' 33). Lukács thus assigns to the novel the humanistic task of exploring how phenomena that seem natural are in fact the results of human activity.

This account becomes interesting with regard to settler colonialism at the point when Lukács argues that realism is not a universally-achievable aesthetic, but depends on a mode of consciousness only available to some positions within the capitalist totality. In *History and Class Consciousness* he explains that while reality "is—immediately—the same for bourgeoisie and proletariat," only the latter can escape mystification (164-65). The bourgeois subject remains trapped by reification insofar as his or her social existence is premised on maintaining the dominance of commodity production; as a result, the bourgeois "makes of every historical object a variable monad which is denied any interaction with other—similarly viewed—monads and which possesses characteristics that appear to be absolutely immutable essences" (Lukács *History* 153). The proletarian, by contrast, can gain access to "conscious[ness] of the social character of labour" (Lukács *History* 171), giving them knowledge of exploitation that, for the bourgeoisie, "would be tantamount to suicide" to

acknowledge (Lukács *History* 181).

Is that idea not even more apt as a description of the colonial settler? For whom else could it be more 'suicidal' to acknowledge the material bases of subjective existence than for the settler, whose life is predicated not only on exploitation, but also on the expropriation and even extermination of native populations? Theorists of settler colonialism often deploy an imagery of mystification and reification that recalls, if implicitly, Lukács' account. In the words of Lorenzo Veracini, for instance, settler colonialism is defined by how it "obscures the conditions of its own production" (14). Suggesting that settlers are traumatised by the violence that attends their seizure of land, he sees their narratives as shaped by obfuscation and denial – a need to hide from the brutality of history and deny the fact of past and ongoing indigenous presence (Veracini 75-77). Read in this way, settler narrative has been described as a mode of repressive "fantasy" that hides reality even from itself (Veracini 91). Other critics have used a corresponding language of "dream" (Hodge and Mishra) or "myth" (Curthoys) to characterise such narratives. It is only a short step from this approach to Lukács' concepts of reification and demystifying critical realism.

While this parallel is suggestive, though, it is important not to elide complexity in highlighting the correspondences between bourgeois and settler mystification. In this Lukács' work is also useful in suggesting how theoretically-distinct possible responses to reification can emerge. In a distinction I argue has relevance for settler-colonial contexts as well, Lukács argues that the division between "proletarian" and "bourgeois" consciousness emerges aesthetically as a difference between two forms of novelistic representation: "realism" and "naturalism." The latter corresponds to the reified perception of reality. Exemplified, supposedly, by Zola and James Joyce, naturalism accepts that the world is comprised of "pre-existing and self-sufficient" objects connected only by natural laws; human beings are embedded within a system they have no role in creating, and must "conform to its laws

whether [they like] it or not" (Lukács *History* 89). Naturalism makes the aesthetic a self-contained cosmos comprehensible on none but its own terms (Lukács 'Modernism' 39), a place where material conflicts are mystified by their displacement into symbolic systems, and freedom is an illusion. Lukács defines realism in contrast to this failure, suggesting it occurs when writers overcome the illusion to achieve awareness of the epic "wholeness" of life, integrating their knowledge of human existence into a totality that identifies how things that seem unrelated are actually manifestations of interconnected processes (Huhn 179; Lukács *Writer* 118). Realism shows history to be made by people, "no longer an enigmatic flux *to which* men [sic] and things are subjected," but a comprehensible process that tends toward liberation – the proletarian revolution (Lukács *History* 185). As such, realism can be achieved only by those who occupy subject positions from which the social totality can be seen without terror. This includes bourgeois novelists in societies not yet confronted by insurgency from below – Britain and France before 1848, Russia slightly later – and those able to adopt the proletarian perspective (Lukács *Writer* 143). Only these groups, Lukács' argues, can connect their subjective malaise to social contradictions, and produce literature that avoids the aesthetic temptations of mystification.

The argument that literary forms reflect access to knowledge of totality explains, for Lukács, the concrete aesthetic features likely to typify realist or naturalist art – forms which thus reflect modes of historical consciousness mediated by social positioning. Lukács' core assumption is that the truth of world history is revealed by dialectics, in the materialist revision of Hegel proposed by Marx (Lukács *History* 177). For this reason, his account of realism stresses three key features: a vision of historical change as driven by contradictions between classes; individuality as a crystallization of socially typical qualities; and time as linear and progressive, tending toward the resolution of conflict in synthesis. In *The Historical Novel* he argues that these features emerge with Walter Scott, the key

representative of bourgeois consciousness during the period between the defeat of the aristocracy and rise of the proletariat (1789-1848). The realism of Scott's novels lies in their distillation of the social conflicts of a period. Contradictions are represented (allegorically, I have argued (Dalley 13-41)) through the actions of typified characters, whose actions are at once concretely individual and exemplary of material forces at work (Lukács *Historical* 46). Lukács highlights Scott's invention of the "middle-of-the-road" protagonist, who plays the role of Hegelian mediator by bringing the "extremes" of social conflict into "human relationship," and whose synthesis of opposites at the end of the novel points in the direction of progress (Lukács *Historical* 36-39). For Lukács, these features are refined by subsequent realists like Balzac and Tolstoy, until their repudiation by aesthetic experimentalists like Flaubert, Zola, and Joyce – who reflect their socially-determined inability to comprehend the dialectical nature of history by producing narratives focused on atypical or eccentric characters, whose experiences do not typify social conflicts, and whose embeddedness in subjective temporalities obfuscates the march of time (Lukács *Writer* 144). Naturalism is regressive and ideologically complicit with capitalism, Lukács' suggests, because it mystifies the fundamental humanistic truth that historical change is *made by people* – who therefore have the power to remake the future (Huhn 182-85).

As I have intimated, some have already sought to reshape Lukács' theories for the postcolonial present. Fredric Jameson and Jed Esty have made the most important suggestions in this regard, exploring how nineteenth- and twentieth-century European literature can be read as a response to changes in the imagination of historical time that were themselves shaped by material processes that include the expansion of transnational capitalism and empire (Jameson *Antinomies*; Esty *Shrinking*). Putting empire back into the picture allows some of Lukács' insights to stand while reshaping his normative judgements. Jameson, for instance, has proposed that European modernism – which Lukács despised as a

naturalist capitulation to reification – can be read instead as a complex attempt to grasp the capitalist totality at a moment when transnational empire has hidden the economic base overseas ('Modernism'). Similarly, Esty has proposed that we can "retain some of [Lukács'] basic methodological and critical insights" while stripping away the presumption that everything after Tolstoy – let alone anything un-European – is unworthy of discussion (Esty 'Global' 367). His *Unseasonable Youth* proposes a history of the novel shaped, like Lukács', around the foundational contradictions of capitalism, but with empire understood as the key material context within which capitalism operates. This change in perspective problematizes notions of progress and unsettles linear temporalities. These works provide inspiration for my approach in this article.

However, I argue that they can be taken further. Altering the focus of analysis to the settler-colonial frontier reveals new dimensions to literary realism not yet grasped by current criticism. The project of globalizing Lukács has, thus far, worked largely by expanding the scope of the dialectic, such that the "proletarian" space understood to be the privileged site of totalizing knowledge comes to include the colonized world (as Jameson attempts in "Third World Literature"). What this approach does not do is address the specificities of historical consciousness in settler societies – a context which cannot easily be folded into an enlarged theoretical perspective but which dislocates some of the theory's formative assumptions. Settler colonialism can be shown to operate according to temporalities that disrupt the dialectical framework subtending Lukács' model, problematizing his account of the realist novel's development while opening new arenas in which to apply his critical distinctions.

As Lorenzo Veracini has convincingly argued, settler colonialism is a distinctive socio-political formation that should not be conflated with either metropolitan or non-settler colonial structures; it is a "third" space different in its dynamics from either metropolitan or traditional peripheral zones and, as such, requires theorization in its own right (2). Current

accounts of settler colonialism identify at least three characteristics of such societies that are likely to cause tensions for a Lukácsian model of realist narrative. The first concerns a narratological paradox implied by the process of settlement itself. As Veracini argues, settlers are distinct from other migrants in that they carry sovereignty with them. Their origin narratives therefore must be at once *linear* – describing the transplantation of community from one place to another – and *circular*, insofar as the country being created is (symbolically) the same as the one that was left (Veracini 98-99). Stephen Turner describes the resulting paradox as a crisis of "colonial being," for as much as settlers wish make themselves *at home* by affirming continuity between themselves and their environment, their identity *as settlers* depends on the necessary discontinuity of "before and after" their arrival (Turner 'Being Colonial' 59). The settler can never achieve symbolic unity with their home; that privilege belongs to the native, who, by definition, is present *ab origine* – from the beginning. Turner argues that this contradiction renders settler narrative irresolvable, in that every attempt to "mask, or bridge" the gap must eventually reveal itself to be "an illusory continuity" (Turner 'Being Colonial' 58-59; see also Calder; Dalley 45-94). Lukács' claim, in his brief reading of Cooper, that settler realism ends with "the Indians' moral disintegration" and their replacement by colonists (*Historical* 64) ignores this paradox and reflects the failure of his progressivism to account for frontier narrative forms. Turner's model suggests that on the contrary the native will insistently return as a marker of the foundational contradictions of settler narrative. As a bearer of the *belonging* the settler cannot possess, the native must be invoked and defeated again and again, as the narratological tension between linearity and circularity prevents the resolution that Lukács' dialectical model requires.

The second area of tension lies in the nature of the conflict settler colonialism entails. For Lukács, bourgeois realism is progressivist insofar as the past is perceived to be a successive chain of contradictions that are resolved in the manner of Hegelian dialectics.

Thus in Scott's *Waverley* the clash between Highland society and English mercantilism is resolved with a synthesis that breaks the economic and political power of the Scots but preserves their folk culture (*Historical* 37) – and, we might add, crucially enlists them as proletarianized labourers. This makes realism a way to exhibit historical continuity by framing the past as "the prehistory of the present" (Lukács *Historical* 53). Settler colonialism, however, presents a scene in which the key social contradiction – between settler and indigene – is not amenable to dialectical synthesis. On the contrary, settlement constructs a reified social order par excellence, in which the material distinction between exploiter and exploited is symbolically coded as the fixity of race. In Frantz Fanon's famous description, the "[settler] colonial world is […] compartmentalized," divided between sectors that "follow the dictates of mutual exclusion" (Fanon 3-4). Unlike the contradictions of Scott or Balzac that resolve in the synthesis of national communities (see Arac), settler and native "confront each other, but not in the service of a higher unity" (Fanon 4). The relationship is, in abstract terms (and notwithstanding empirical variations to the underlying structure), predicated on the displacement and/or destruction of one society by another, *not* on the synthesis of opposing forces. Settler colonialism is defined by what Patrick Wolfe describes as a genocidal "logic of elimination" (Wolfe 'Elimination' 387), a "zero-sum" pattern that means "settler societies, for all their internal complexities," and regardless of individuals' wishes, "uniformly require the elimination of Native alternatives" (Wolfe 'Binarism' 257). This logic is incommensurable with the progressivist model for it entails no resolution but the destruction of one group by the other – which itself, like a racial type immune to miscegenation, remains ideally unchanged.

This structure produces the final, temporal difference between settler-colonialism and Lukács' model. As Wolfe puts it, "invasion is a structure not an event" – "elimination" is the "organising principle" of settler colonies and not a "one-off (and superseded) occurrence"

(Wolfe 'Structure' 102-3). In other words, because the settler-colonial relation does not resolve through synthesis, its foundational logic as a structural binary persists as long as settlement is incomplete. Since indigenous peoples have almost always survived the settler onslaught, this means, in practical terms, forever. It is not simply that settler societies are still colonized. The compartmentalized form of settler-colonial relations means the frontier "is a continuous process" (Gall 99), not a finished event; it is not the "prehistory" of contemporary society (Lukács *Historical* 53) but its underlying truth. For this reason we can say that settler colonies are places where "time does not pass" (Baucom 24). Narratives predicated on the *pastness* of the past cannot be adequate to this social formation, for they would mystify the fact that regardless of appearances, the frontier is still with us today.

Settler colonialism thus rests on a foundation that puts it at odds with the progressive historicism underpinning European literary development according to Lukács. Critics have reinforced this view by positing settler narrative as a mode of disavowal, one that turns away from the brutal realities of the frontier to provide post-settler communities with sanitised origins (Veracini; Hodge and Mishra). The fact that the settler colony is not imaginatively progressive means there can be no mediation in which the settler discovers his or her futurist role – as there is, Lukács argues, in the bourgeois realist phase. Rather, the settler avoids confronting the truth of his or her existence, either by projecting social contradictions onto the non-human environment – which becomes a proxy for the absent native (Curthoys; Ashcroft) – or by erecting a "screen memory" of other, non-existentially troubling conflicts (Veracini 90). Either way, what is lost in settler narrative is the *real* of its material foundation.

That said, I suggest that Lukács can offer ways to understand variations within this subgenre. If we follow Esty and "turn Lukács against Lukács" ('Global' 366), we might conceptualize setter-colonial novels not *only* as a form predicated on denial of the real, but

also, potentially, on the recovery of distinctive forms of critical realism. In what follows, I suggest that if settler-colonial narratives cannot be predicated on the discovery of progressive temporality through conflict, they might nonetheless enact at least two other possible forms of non-progressive historicism. On the one hand, they might embrace settler ideology, deny or naturalise colonial conquest, and try to construct a world reconciled to the absence of time. On the other, they might seek to face the traumatic real of colonialism and seek out its existence, not only as a semi-forgotten past but also as an ongoing structural effect. If we put aside Lukács' normative commitment to nineteenth-century forms, we might understand these alternatives via his distinction between naturalism and realism. Insofar as the former reproduces dominant ideology, it makes historical processes *natural* and hence unchangeable. Insofar as the latter sets itself the archaeological task of unearthing contradictions and opposing the reification of settlement, it achieves a kind of *realism* – as unexpected as its forms might be. The remainder of this paper tests that hypothesis, suggesting that we find examples of settler naturalism and realism in contemporary historical novels from New Zealand and Australia. If this argument is found to be plausible, it will stand as a sign that settler-colonial fiction functions in a complex tension with other modes of literary realism, requiring us to find new ways to understand how the novel develops according to complex, contradictory, and uneven temporalities.

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The Luminaries presents a formally- and thematically-complex engagement with colonial settlement in New Zealand. Centred on the West Coast gold rushes of the 1860s, it invokes the period James Belich calls "explosive colonisation," when a conjunction of material and ideological factors provoked mass migration and wholesale "societal reproduction" in the colony (Belich *Replenishing* 182). The novel focuses on a quest to identify the true owner of gold discovered in a murdered settler's cabin. Its 800 pages trace

this fortune through the possession of numerous characters, linking them in a pattern that spans the colony's social parameters, from the institutional power of the local Member of Parliament, to bankers, businessmen, brothel-owners, prostitutes, indentured Chinese labourers, and dispossessed Māori. In so doing, *The Luminaries* displays virtuosic formal control, matching nineteenth-century stylistic features to a non-linear narrative that evokes twentieth-century modernism.

Catton's ideological risks equal her aesthetic ones: her chosen period is fraught for contemporary New Zealanders. Since the mid-1970s frontier history has been a cause of public disputation, as Māori political movements have sought redress for colonisation, and Pakeha (white settlers) have struggled with the resulting threat to their legitimacy (see Orange). The 1860s are central to that contention, as a period marked by armed resistance from some Māori and a panicked, violent backlash by British and settler forces (Belich *Wars*). From the 1990s a neo-colonial brand of Pakeha nationalism has emerged, which seeks to ignore, minimise, or rationalise frontier injustice, and to dismiss Māori critiques by denying the relevance of the past (Turner 'Settlement as Forgetting' 21-23; Williams). As recently as 2014, the conservative Prime Minister John Key demonstrated the processes of disavowal at work, declaring that doubts about the legitimacy of colonial sovereignty in New Zealand were irrelevant because the country was "settled peacefully," by colonists who brought "a lot of skills and a lot of capital" ('Settled Peacefully'). The frontier haunts the political imaginary, troubling the beneficiaries of dispossession who must "depopulate the country of indigenous peoples in representations and especially in recollections," if they are to retain their sense of self as *settled* in transplanted sovereignty (Veracini 82).

Read against this context, Catton's aesthetic experimentalism is striking in its idiosyncratic approach. The novel places secular history in dialogue with astrology, asking readers to understand how these incompatible discourses organize her work formally. The

"Note to the Reader" with which Catton opens assures that "stellar and planetary positions in this book" have been "determined astronomically" (*Luminaries* ix), a theme that continues in the "character chart," which groups the twenty central figures according to their status as "stellar", "planetary", or "terra firma," and which assigns each star-character a "related house" and each planet-character a "related influence" (xi). The chapter structure reinforces this puzzle-form. It is divided into twelve sections (repeating the numerical form of the zodiac), of which each is shorter than the one before, waning (like the moon) from 360 pages in Part I to 4 pages in Part XII. Form is here matched by temporality: each chapter is set during a single day – with flashbacks – and opens with an astrological diagram mapping planetary positions against the zodiac. The chart associates signs with characters, indicating, for instance, that Thomas Balfour equates to Sagittarius, Aubert Gascoigne to Capricorn, and so on. Each section advances consistently by one month, from January to December, while the annual setting varies, so that Parts I-III cover January-March 1866, Part IV alternates between April 1865 and 1866, and Parts V-XII run from May-December 1865. This pattern blends linear progression through the months with circularity, as we return at the end to events that precipitated the beginning.

Catton's insistent focus on structures both hidden and apparent recalls Lukács' definition of realism as representation that looks beneath "whatever manifests itself immediately and on the surface" ('Balance' 33). *The Luminaries* plays with distinctions between appearance and reality. Catton alludes to Stendhal's famous description of the realist novel as "a mirror carried along a high road" (Stendhal vol. 2 166), declaring the present to be "an age of mirrors" (ix), and, several times, presenting images that make sense only if understood as reflected: for example, "sunrise over the coastline" (478, 795) in a place – Hokitika – where the sun actually *sets* over the sea. Invitations to find patterns are dispersed throughout the text. The novel's opening line highlights the gap between apparent

randomness and actual structure in its association of characters and setting: "The twelve men congregated in the smoking room of the Crown Hotel *gave the impression* of a party accidentally met" (3; emphasis added). Purposelessness resolves into metaphorical resonance when we realize the room's layout corresponds to a zodiac, centred on the "sun" (fireplace) and ringed by a circle of immobile figures, of whom half are made invisible by the observer's "horizon" of sight: "The armchair in which [Moody] was sitting faced the hearth, and so nearly half of the men in the room were behind him, sitting or standing at their various sham pursuits" (26). Reinforcing this hermeneutic injunction, the word "design" recurs numerously, and its multiple significations – "pattern," "intention," "conspiracy" – highlight the fact that, as Lukács says of society broadly, hidden determinants connect seemingly random phenomena ('Balance' 31-2). Or, as Moody reflects, "There had to be a better explanation for all of this than merely the correlative accident of circumstance" (350).

Reading *The Luminaries* well therefore means discerning its hidden pattern. If this split between surface and structure betrays an impulse toward realism, however, I argue that the actual form of that substrate creates a novel complicit with settler-colonial ideology. *The Luminaries* is organized by two interlocking frames, one of which is contained within, and determined by, the other — a "Sphere within a Sphere," to use the title of Part I (1). This structure allows Catton to stabilize the tensions between the non-progressive temporality of the frontier and the settlers' need to separate past from present. On my reading, this pattern reifies colonial history, invoking the frontier only to *naturalize* it through a symbolic structure that makes the past safe for consumption.

The first part of this interlocking pattern is comprised of a progressivist account of settler history. This narrative frames colonial development according to the "palindrome" form that for Veracini is typical of settler-colonial fantasies (100-101). Catton's Hokitika is a frontier town expanding rapidly as fortune-hunters congregate from around the world. She

shows how in 1865-6, the "extractive" phase of development focused on gold (Belich, *Replenishing* 190-92) is giving way to capital investment, a shift that marks both losses and gains. Westland is soon to be connected by road to Christchurch, and the chief-gaoler George Shepard wants to build a new prison before Alistair Lauderbeck, newly elected to Parliament, can divert the funds elsewhere. As Shepard makes clear, the prison is a symbol of Hokitika's transitional state, poised between historical phases he defines as "savage" and "civil". The initial gold rush was characterised by the conventions of "digger's law," in which each prospector enforced his rights through violence (133-34). This tips over into the period of capital accumulation when "prospectors give way to dams and dredges and company mines," a phase that requires a new "code of justice" to be enforced by "civilized men" (133-34). This account presents the colony as a liminal zone, poised in a "twilight" of change "between the old world and the new" (135) – a moment when norms are in flux and social advancement is possible.

The material precondition of transformation in this phase is gold, an object that introduces the possibility of sudden, almost messianic, redemption into the linear pattern of savage-to-civil time. Catton's colonists dream of the strike that would let them return wealthy to Britain; as Shepard puts it, "A homeward bounder [huge discovery] is a chance for total reinvention" – a "promise [not] offered in the civil world" (144-45). The paradox of the frontier is thus that great rewards are made possible by social fluidity. It is a space at once connected to the progressivist structures of capitalist accumulation, and magically exempt from the strictures of class. Catton reflects this paradox by narrating how a single homeward-bounder, discovered by an alcoholic, broken-down settler, passes fortuitously from hand to hand, changing each character who touches it. The transformative implications of this process mean that gold is not riches or currency but *fortune,* a word that conflates ideas of wealth, chance and destiny (488-89). At the same time, gold is the mundane lubricant of economic

development, a process that will eventually make Hokitika a "shadow of the British Isles" (10), where the "muck and hazard" (11) of the frontier have been foreclosed. This pattern imprints historical time with the futurity of capital accumulation. As one character declares, "Gold was like all capital in that it had no memory: its drift was always onward, away from the past" (104).

To this extent, the historical structure of *The Luminaries* replicates the progressivist form equated by Lukács with realism – a form that *also* subtends settler-colonial fantasies of social reproduction (Veracini 98-99). *The Luminaries* is further complicated, however, by the existence of the second framework provided by the astrological schema, which encompasses and determines the historical pattern. This second framework is the ultimate source of causation in the narrative, and hence occupies the position of the *real* for its imagined world: a fact that I argue secures the novel's settler-colonial *naturalism.* As mentioned, each individual corresponds to a star sign or planet, associations that shape the development of the novel beyond material factors. Each character's personality derives from his or her astrological identity. For example, Benjamin Lowenthal, a Jewish newspaper proprietor, corresponds to Gemini, a fact that explains his personality as a man "fated to see the inherent duality in all things" (198; compare Snodgrass 109). Characters fall in love because the stars demand it – as in the case of Edgar Clinch, who, as the embodiment of Cancer, must "answers to both the element of water and to the moon" (Snodgrass 121-22), and does so by desiring the novel's lunar avatar, Anna Wetherill ("a reflected darkness, just as she was a borrowed light" (225)). Astrology likewise determines conflict. Clinch loathes Aubert Gascoigne (Capricorn) for reasons he cannot explain, but which make sense when we see that these characters – "two fighting dogs across a pit" (246) – stand directly opposed on the astrological chart. It is only when we grasp this pattern that the novel's twists and turns make sense; without it, relations among characters, and the resulting plot, seem arbitrary.

It is crucial to realize that this allegorical structure exists as an understanding between narrator and reader, and does not derive from the consciousness of any character. No figure in *The Luminaries* ever discusses astrology, and the star charts are without diegetic justification. The novel is not an analysis of how nineteenth-century prospectors imagined their world; rather, astrology offers a metaphorical key to events. Once this is realized, interactions become comprehensible as cosmological operations before which individual motivations shrink to irrelevance. "Conjunctions" (a recurrent term) between characters are decided by the alignment of stars and planets, creating patterns that seem to accord with the demands of realist plausibility but which are actually astronomically determined. Even contradictions that seem historical – such as the contest between Shepard and Lauderbeck over development projects – actually serve this astrological intent: in this case, marking the contest for dominance between Saturn (Shepard) and Jupiter (Lauderbeck), whose symbolic identities as successive rulers of the heavens recode the novel's setting "between the old world and the new" (135) in mythological, rather than historical, terms.

The primacy of astrology over history can be seen how the former resolves contradictions the latter cannot. For example, Catton's characters can appear improbable when read with the assumption that their personalities reflect circumstance or culture. The most important case concerns Te Rau Tauwhare, the novel's only Māori character. At the level of the historical framework, he appears as a proto-nationalist or anti-colonialist, a man resentful of the expropriation of his people's land. Invoking the frontier as an ongoing structure, he perceives the West Coast gold rushes as a "patent theft" built on the foundational crime of occupation (98). Yet his feelings do not stop him befriending Crosbie Wells, a settler who occupies that stolen land and lives off its resources (99). Tauwhare call Wells his "kindred spirit" (100), at the same time as he affirms Wells' valley to be "his own" and reacts with outrage "whenever any tract of Te Tai Poutini land was bought for profit

rather than for use" (369). The historical narrative cannot explain this inconsistency, but the astrological one can: Tauwhare corresponds to Taurus in Catton's schema, meaning that, as an earth sign, his love for "terra firma" – Wells himself – is cosmically predetermined.

As this example shows, the astrological schema renders *The Luminaries*' historical frame secondary to the whole. Insofar as it is the latter that bears the narrative's awareness of colonial expropriation, we can conclude that Catton invokes the frontier only to make it structurally irrelevant by subsuming it within a larger, determining cosmological pattern. Indeed, Catton's astrology renders notions of human agency, whether individual or collective, ironic in general. Characters believe themselves to be making decisions, but their very role in the story waxes and wanes not according to their acts but the mathematical association of stars and planets. Astrology thus functions as a source of ironic distance. Characters believe themselves to possess self-understanding and agency, but readers – better informed of how their world operates – see their confidence is misplaced. The novel instead affirms "the vast and knowing influence of the infinite sky" (ix) – an impersonal, anti-humanist force against which individual subjects, and their conflicts, shrink to irrelevance.

To this extent, *The Luminaries* can be seen as a specifically settler-colonial instance of reified consciousness. As Lukács describes, reification produces a social world from which human activity appears to have been drained, one governed by impersonal laws that, like movements in the sky, "confront [the individual] as invisible forces that generate their own power" (*History* 87). To read this novel is to find a narrative of expropriation, mass settlement, and economic development – plotted according to a progressivist temporality that is an alibi of settler colonialism – subsumed within an anti-humanist framework without which nothing would cohere. Lukács' account of reification describes the resulting world perfectly: "reality disintegrates into a multitude of irrational facts and over these a network of purely formal 'laws' emptied of content is then cast" (*History* 155). To this extent, Catton's

"avant-garde" (McAlpine) fiction is aligned with the settler-colonial imaginary, reproducing its palindromic form within a self-contained cosmos governed by irresistible laws.

Catton's naturalism thus instantiates, as form, colonialist ideology. As Veracini observes, "settler projects are recurrently born in a perception of "emptiness"" (82), and this is a key outcome of *The Luminaries'* draining of its imagined world of agency. In an essay appended to the American edition of the novel Catton depopulates the New Zealand landscape, describing the South Island as a place of "sublime natural beauty" that resists description because it is unshaped by human activity ('Land of the Long White Cloud' 11). The novel itself reflects the narrative incoherence this erasure provokes when it implies that New Zealand's land was at once uninhabited by Māori, and occupied by Pakeha with their consent. Not only does Tauwhare legitimize Wells' settlement through his metaphorical kindship, he cheerfully helps surveyors map his ancestral country for sale (369). Perhaps what is most striking is the extent to which *The Luminaries'* naturalism aligns with Pakeha nationalism by splitting past and present – a division that, as conservative politicians argue (see Brash), makes historical injustice irrelevant to today. This is a necessary product of the astrological schema, for if character and event are products of cosmic design, and human agency is an illusion, then historical processes have no role in shaping life. It is *meaningless*, on those terms, to suggest that social inequities have historical roots, or that the frontier might persist not as a memory but as a wound in the communal self. If "History is what hurts," astrology is anaesthetic for the novel-form (Jameson *Political* 102).

<center>*</center>

In this way we can see a distinctive kind of aesthetic naturalism emerging from the novel's encounter with settler colonialism. What, then, might a *critical realism* of the frontier look like? A form logically implied by the account above would involve resisting the naturalization of settler-colonial progressivism, while simultaneously affirming the humanist

foundation of historical change. I suggest an example of such form can be found in the work of the Australian historical novelist Rohan Wilson, whose two novels of Tasmanian settlement differ from *The Luminaries* substantially. Wilson's fiction enacts the core project of Lukácsian realism by unearthing the determinants of change. But since the change in question concerns frontier conflict, they do not replicate the aesthetic norms of metropolitan realism but respond to the specific representational pressures of that context. This settler-colonial realism is resolutely anti-progressivist, mapping the fissure in time torn by the frontier and tracing the permutations of the settler-indigene binary as it returns in modified forms. Settler realism, this analysis reveals, involves a rigorous commitment to demystification and a willingness to enter the nightmare world of settler colonialism, where time does not – and cannot be *allowed* to – pass.

The Roving Party (2011) and *To Name Those Lost* (2014) narrate a forty-year period of colonialism in Van Diemen's Land/Tasmania. Remembered as one of the bloodiest frontiers of the British Empire, Tasmania became a key battleground of Australia's "history wars" of the 1990s and 2000s (see MacIntyre and Clark) – a political context Wilson explains in a recent interview (Wilson and Dalley). The former novel is set during the final stages of the "Black War," the struggle for control of the island between white settlers (free and convicts) and Aboriginal Tasmanians. It centres on a series of military expeditions led by John Batman, key opponent of Aboriginal resistance and later founder of Melbourne. For those involved in this war, the absolute nature of the frontier, inscribed as a racial hierarchy, goes without saying: as the young convict Thomas Toosey learns, "You cant [sic] murder a black […] any more than you can murder a cat" (*Roving* 99). *To Name Those Lost* returns to this character forty years later, when the Aboriginal population has been decimated and men like Toosey bear a legacy of violence that puts them at odds with the colony they helped establish. Toosey's life cuts across the linear transition of colonial development. His failure

to adjust to settled society (when the novel opens he is a recovering alcoholic who has just robbed a friend, severely disfiguring a young woman in the process) reflects the ongoing consequences of the colony's originating forms, even when the racial struggle itself seems to have ended.

What is striking is the extent to which Wilson draws connections between the two novels, positioning the second as a kind of repetition or recapitulation of the first. Both, significantly, have the same plot structure, being centred on *hunts* in which the major characters adopt the roles of pursuer and pursued. In *The Roving Party*, Batman organises two expeditions to chase a band of Aboriginal warriors led by Manalargena, a charismatic leader determined to resist dispossession. Within this struggle is a personal battle in which Batman's assistant Black Bill – an Indigenous Tasmanian raised by settlers – is asked by Manalargena to join him, but instead sides with the colonists. In *To Name Those Lost* the pursuit is likewise doubled. Toosey is hunted by Fitheal Flynn, an ex-convict turned cattle farmer from whom he has stolen two hundred pounds, while himself seeking his motherless son, a boy lost in the town of Launceston. The symbolic resonance of this shared structure is suggested by a parable told by Manalargena:

> There was two brother you see. They live near a river them brother. They catch plenty crayfish in river. […] Hunter come to the river. He is hungry hunter you see. He want crayfish. He see them brother eating crayfish, singing song. He want crayfish too. He bring up spear. […] But them brother they scared you see. They scared and they run. They run and they change. They change to wallaby and they jump. […] So hunter he change too. He run and he change to that wallaby and he jump. Now three wallaby jump near river. They eat grass. They forget the crayfish. […] Three wallaby near the river you see. Not two and one but three. Them brother lost, you understand. […] Them all lost. All same you see. (*Roving* 7-8)

Manalargena's story reveals how pursuit creates differentiation – between the two brothers who control resources, and the hunter who wants it – and that this distinction conveys identity and hence humanity on those involved. In addition to the story's diegetic function, as a device to convince Bill to side with 'his people' against the colonists, it also reflects the underlying structure of Wilson's hunt-narratives, which rely upon a foundational separation between those who possess and dispossess. Manalargena implies that to forget such distinctions is to lose sight of reality and, to that extent, to lose oneself. Read in this light, Wilson commits his novels to acknowledging the reality of the frontier as the defining structure of settler colonialism, and to resisting the urge to forget or mystify this foundational distinction.

Where Wilson's novels differ is in the object of desire that motivates each pursuit – a shift that reveals how the frontier, readily comprehensible in the initial phase of settlement, becomes mystified as time goes by. In *The Roving Party* the war's aim is clear: to control the island's farmland. The novel is replete with imagery highlighting the land's contested status, signs that to Bill – who straddles settler and Aboriginal societies – are ever-present. Bill observes of Batman's property that "to [the white settlers'] eyes the whole of Kingston farm was a swath of order hacked out of chaos, a stamp of authority hammered into Van Diemen's Land" (*Roving* 26). But to him are apparent "the ancient constructions of the Plindermairhemener, the precisely burned plains carved over generations to advantage the hunter, the lands called up anew with every footfall" (*Roving* 26). Contradictory marks of ownership recur as the rovers find trees "carved over with bisected circles, detailings of the moon and sun, images of snakes and roo" – "finely wrought icons" of possession that, after the party attacks an Aboriginal camp, are overlaid by a survivor's "bloody handprint" (*Roving* 88). The war's stakes are clear, for Batman has occupied "the best [land] for his sheep," forcing the clans onto "loose uneven soil" that provides no food (*Roving* 54). Wilson

thereby foregrounds the historical argument that frontier violence was the inevitable outcome of the conflict over farmland (compare Barta; Boyce 186-206). Batman's willingness to "shoot every last black hide on this mountain" (*Roving* 78) is less a statement of bloodlust than a clear-eyed description of the structural logic of settler colonialism.

By the 1870s and *To Name Those Lost* the land has been secured, making its function at the base of social conflict harder to discern. The narrative nonetheless engages in this demystifying task by showing how the hunt at its centre concerns wealth produced from colonised land. The stolen two hundred pounds belong to Flynn, a former convict who earned them farming the very region pacified by Toosey and his comrades in *The Roving Party*. Toosey exchanges the notes for gold coins at the Launceston Bank, a building that exhibits in "monumental" style "the spirit of wealth taken hold in the colony" (*Lost* 99), making it a visible mark of the economic development that has followed pacification. Toosey hides the gold, hoping to buy secret passage with his son William to Melbourne, and there start a new life free of his convict past (*Lost* 266). At every step, though, he meets rival claimants willing to steal or kill for the money. Wilson thus foregrounds gold's status as *currency*, an abstract bearer of value that – in keeping with the colony's agricultural foundation – derives from the combination of land and labour, and functions to transfer that value. The capitalist infrastructure recurs in Wilson's characterisation of Toosey as "a ticket-of-leavesman free to sell his labour" (*Lost* 205), and in a scene in which Toosey counts the money in "a copse of long-ago burnt gums that wore a green fur of regrowth" – unburned forest signalling, in the Australian context, the absence of Indigenous Tasmanians who would normally have tended the land with fire (*Lost* 56). Moreover, by contextualising the "monumental" Launceston Bank, where agricultural profits are exchanged, within a town of "telegraph lines […] canned-goods emporiums and coffee palaces" (*Lost* 99), Wilson reveals how visible markers of economic modernity derive from the colony's agricultural base, and thence from the

dispossession depicted in *The Roving Party*. When Toosey presents his notes for exchange they are "stained with blood" – blood of the men he fights for them, but also, it is implied, of the Aborigines he helped kill under Batman's command (*Lost* 100).

In this way, Wilson echoes Catton in presenting gold as the engine of individual transformation. Yet by linking his novels Wilson emphasises that gold is not a magic talisman, but a signifier of social relations, bearing the marks of conflict and domination. This focus on the material origins of value marks the distance between Wilson's and Catton's approaches. I noted above the claim – voiced by Tauwhare, of all people – that gold has "no memory" (*Luminaries* 104), and indeed Catton's byzantine plot is dissimilar to Wilson's in obfuscating the links between Wells' fortune and colonial expropriation. Her discussion of unfair land sales refers to Poutini Ngai Tahu territory – "the entire western coast of the South Island" (98) – but her gold originates in Central Otago (676), territory to which Tauwhare has no claim. In Catton's world, "gold in a river does not belong to anyone; nor does it belong to the river" (324), implying that it is the diggers' good luck, rather than their participation in a colonial economy, that brings "fortune" into existence. *The Luminaries* makes the colony a place where value circulates apolitically, without reference to the structural inequalities apparent in Wilson's work.

Wilson's novels, by contrast, open up the social contradictions of nineteenth-century Tasmania to explore the impact of colonialism on characters across class and race divides. To this extent, his work's specificity as a settler-colonial variant of realism becomes apparent. The character structure of *The Roving Party* maps onto Lukács' "classical historical novel" (Lukács 63) insofar as it is focalised by Black Bill. He straddles the division between settler and Aboriginal societies and, as a "middle-of-the-road" figure (Lukács *Historical* 37), brings Batman and Manalargena, "whose clash expresses artistically a great crisis in society, into contact with one another" (Lukács *Historical* 36). But where Lukács sees the middling

protagonist as a mechanism of dialectical synthesis, Wilson refuses the temptation of progressive resolution. It becomes increasingly clear that Black Bill's position is untenable; in the colony, one is *either* settler or native, and as a member of Batman's party, Bill "aint no part athat [Indigenous society] no more" (*Roving* 168). The narrative forecloses on the possibility of a biological future for Bill when his son dies shortly after birth, having been cursed by Manalargena in revenge for Bill's role in the war. Bill and his wife Katherine then track Manalargena, intending to kill him, but the novel's climactic fight ends without conclusion; both men are wounded but survive. The allegorical solution that would have been implied had Bill defeated Manalargena – that a modified Indigeneity might persist within colonialism – is thus prevented from defeating the radical, if unachievable, anticolonial alternative. In this way Wilson rejects the option presented by Lukács' model, keeping the foundational contradiction open by refusing any future that is a synthetic development of the present.

That future instead appears as *To Name Those Lost,* a novel that signals the persistence of colonial contradictions in new forms through a narrative in which the primary conflict – between Toosey and Flynn – is peripheral to, rather than representative of, the social divide. Their struggle takes place against the background of unrest provoked when the government levies citizens to bail out a railway company. Flynn seizes the opportunity of rioting to attack Toosey, and their fight — which leaves the former dead and the latter injured and defenceless when Flynn's daughter Caislyn comes for revenge — happens as the chaos takes on the contours of a lower-class rebellion (*Lost* 150-51, 187-96). This expresses how the dynamics of social inequality have shifted. If race is the marker of the frontier in the late 1820s – as the battle to defeat the Aborigines binds free and unfree whites into an alliance of shared interests – then the defeat of the Indigenous population by the 1870s sees class distinctions re-emerge. In this context, Toosey's personal struggle for freedom no longer

coincides with the core contradictions of colonial society – a change signalled by his move to the periphery of the conflict.

In other words, *To Name Those Lost* is shaped by the dehiscence of plot and social contradiction, a formal effect that manifests the fact that while the frontier (as an emblem of material struggle for land) remains fundamental, it is no longer readily accessible to the consciousness of colonial subjects. The process of mystification is underway, and only a rigorous attention to ongoing colonial relations – achieved here by Wilson's commitment to trace the origins of settler wealth – can avoid the fall into naturalism. This effect suggests a new way to think of the paradox raised above, in which Lukács implies vis-a-vis Cooper that settler colonialism is too obvious a subject for sophisticated realism. Wilson's novels suggest that settler realism is indeed more accessible (if not better or worse) when the frontier is drawn by race. Subsequent periods require an almost archaeological commitment to tracing the contours of buried structures. This effort is revealed by the shift in characterisation in *To Name Those Lost*, a sign of the modulation of conflict into class forms and the attending increase in aesthetic difficulty.

The resulting work nonetheless succeeds in dissolving settler-colonial progressivism in a temporality that I argue is realist *insofar* as it abandons the forms praised as such by Lukács. Like *The Roving Party, To Name Those Lost* embodies its putative telos in the figure of the son, to whom Toosey wishes to give his gold and resettle in Melbourne. This conclusion would represent the triumph of mystification, for Toosey's entire purpose in relocating is to hide the origins of his stolen wealth. Wilson again rejects this solution. Toosey is killed and the gold retaken by Caislyn, leaving the novel at a dead-end, in a graveyard, with the narrator declaring not the possibilities of the young, but the "debt" they owe to "those lost" (*Lost* 295). Melancholia here is both tone and temporality. It marks the novels' rejection of progress, and their affirmation instead that in the settler colony – where

foundational contradictions are a "structure not an event" (Wolfe 'Structure' 103) – "time

does not pass" (Baucom 24), except in the fantasies of those interested in denial. As Baucom

explains, this melancholic approach works "not only by recalling to memory the violence of

the imperial past" but, crucially, "by refusing that Hegelian and post-Hegelian model of

historical time which views this past and its violence as, in fact, *past* and, so, no longer

pertinent to a present practice of justice or philosophy of right" (Baucom 305). Nothing could

be less amenable to settler-colonial ideology and its contemporary apologists. It is in this

sense that Wilson's novels are true to the spirit of Lukács, embodying realism without

replicating European norms. They are non-progressive, materialist, and committed to the

continuity of past and present – not as successive states, but as interconnected moments of an

ongoing dispossession. The contrast to Catton's work, a naturalism that turns in on itself, is

striking.

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Much more could, of course, be said about these complex novels. One off-putting

thing about Lukács' criticism is his tendency to totalize judgements, so that a diagnosis of

naturalism or realism becomes not just an interpretive claim but a statement of moral worth.

There is far more to Wilson's and Catton's work than covered here. Nonetheless, I believe

this reading shows that Lukács' theories continue to have value for the analysis of

postcolonial literatures, illuminating how the ideological dimensions of settler colonialism

transform the novel in these contexts. They also offer a framework to differentiate approaches

to settler-colonial narrative. It is clearly the case that the critical categories I have proposed

are ideal types; further analysis might benefit from treating them as points upon a spectrum,

or as aesthetic possibilities that individual works instantiate to greater or lesser degree. It is

also worth recalling that while the frontier contradiction is what defines settler society, there

are other important divisions too. Elsewhere I have discussed the importance of gender for

settler-colonial narrative (Dalley 70-94), while Veracini emphasises that non-settler migrants comprise another essential group (4).

What these examples show above all is that settler-colonial realism operates at a distance from traditional metropolitan forms without breaking fully from them. Lukács' error was not to suggest that the frontier is part of the history of Europe – for it is undoubtedly a crucial site of capitalist modernity – but rather to inscribe that relationship within a linear framework that relegated the settler-colonial novel to a primitive phase of literary history. Frontier time does not work that way. Settler colonialism is not an early stage of capitalist modernity but an ongoing structural relationship, one that is as much part of our present as our past. Theories of the novel need to accommodate this truth, and our understanding of realism must be able to account for the dislocations of historical consciousness that settler colonialism introduces. As such, we need critical approaches that can grapple with temporal unevenness in narrating the history of the novel, and thereby do justice to a genre that is at once part of modern history *and* entangled with material and ideological contexts that are irreducible to traditional metropolitan-peripheral models. It is on that basis, I argue, that we can begin to discuss the meaning of settler realism.

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