Rural Historicity in Popular Speculative Futurities: Eco-anxiety as Settler Anxiety

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CHAPTER 7

Rural Historicity in Popular Speculative Futurities: Eco-anxiety as Settler Anxiety

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Abstract

This chapter explores the affective management performed by settler colonial genres of rurality, specifically those pertaining to the US West, in tending to contemporary forms of eco-anxiety. It does this through a close analysis of the SF film *Interstellar* (2014), exploring in particular the sense of historicity the western frontier rural – including the farmstead and the frontiersman – manages in relation to the film's dealing with climate crisis and humanity's envisioned future. *Interstellar*'s supposed concern with climate change is exposed as underpinned by a latent settler concern over the loss of property, hetero-reproductivity, and progress.

1 Three Vignettes: Western Rurality in Times of Capitalist Crisis

During the summer of 2021, Amazon-founder Jeff Bezos and his New Shephard rocket shot into space in a bid for extraplanetary colonization and space travel. Bezos had previously boasted about the need for continuous growth and innovation in the face of humanity's potential demise, revealing how his imagination of outer space is heavily informed by a settler colonial-cum-capitalist teleology:

> I'm pursuing [space travel] because I believe, if we don't, we will eventually end up with a civilization of stasis … the Solar System can easily support a trillion humans … And if we have a trillion humans we would have … unlimited sources. By the way, I believe that … we will move all heavy industry off of Earth and Earth will be zoned residential and light industry. (qtd. in Dopfner: n. pag.)[1]

1 In envisioning his own project of extraplanetary colonization, Elon Musk taps into a similar narrative that is reminiscent of the doctrine of Manifest Destiny: "You want to wake up in the morning and think the future is going to be great – and that's what being a spacefaring

After Blue Origin's New Shepard shuttle landed in the arid Texan landscape, Bezos stepped out buoyantly, wearing a cowboy hat and matching boots.[2] While Bezos's sartorial choice can be seen as a nod to his Texas roots, the aesthetic framing of the entrepreneur as a literal space cowboy stepping out of his shuttle into the desert mesa, with mountains edging on the horizon, clearly positions him as one of the rugged and virile subjects that are idealized in settler colonial imaginations of the rural US West: the cowboy, or frontiersman, who discovers "unknown" territory and expands America's frontier.[3] The narrative and aesthetic tropes and motifs from the Western genre that appear in Bezos's (self)representation – most importantly, the frontiersman, the frontier landscape, and the pursuit of progress – speak to the manner in which ideological structures of US American settler coloniality continue to be intimately felt and culturally (re)negotiated or, in other words, how they reinforce a "structure of feeling" (Williams 1977) historically related to the cultural imagination of the rural US West. Given Bezos's popularity and influence – he was an invited speaker at the UN Climate Change Conference in 2021 – one might ask: what kind of affective management do these settler colonial imaginations of the region perform in the ordinary present of crisis? The appeal of leaving Earth and colonizing space remained very much alive, after all, in a year where Covid-19, global warming, environmental catastrophe, and social injustice further deteriorated everyday fantasies of the good life.

Meanwhile, a myriad of fulfillment and distribution centers, mines, factories, and industrial plants mark the everyday landscape of the rural US West. Take Bezos's Amazon Fulfillment Centers, where thousands of products are stored, picked, packed, and shipped by temporary workers paid minimum wage. Or the Tahoe Reno Industrial Center (TRIC) in rural Nevada, where Elon Musk is constructing his Gigafactory 1, a lithium-ion battery and electric vehicle component factory that serves, among others, Tesla Motors. Musk has

civilization is all about. It's about believing in the future and thinking that the future will be better than the past" (www.spacex.com).

2 To see Bezos in his space cowboy gear: https://images.app.goo.gl/zkQmUf4tizzTjs1z7. Blue Origin, LLC is a "privately funded aerospace manufacturer and sub-orbital spaceflight services company" that was established in 2000 by Bezos (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blue_Origin).

3 Bezos is known to regularly reference settler colonial and western frontier imaginations in relation to both Amazon and his own celebrity text. Ben Little and Alison Winch show in detail how, on top of Bezos's Blue Origin discourses, his continuous references to his and his family's origins in Texas ranch culture, and his invocation of Manifest Destiny ideology in formulating Amazon's mission and ethos draw on and are "embedded in the semantic structures" of US settler and frontier imaginations (104).

said that, once completed, the Gigafactory will be the largest building on the planet. Its lithium-ion batteries are used in electric cars, including Tesla's, and are hailed as the environmentally friendly alternative to vehicles (and other technology) running on fossil fuels. In what the *New York Times* has called a new gold rush, global powers like the US, China, and Europe are fighting for control over minerals that would "help countries achieve economic and technological dominance for decades to come" (Penn and Lipton n. pag.). The costs of mining materials like lithium have proved disastrous to land, water, wildlife, and – often Indigenous – people in countries such as Chile, Argentina, Bolivia, and China (Wade). As this neocolonial race for minerals endures, plans to open a second lithium mine in Nevada by Lithium Americas – whose major shareholder is Ganfeng, a Chinese company – continue amidst protests by Native American tribes, ranchers, and environmental groups. Moreover, although the TRIC and Tesla's battery factory have brought an economic influx to the state, as well as high-paid tech jobs, the arrival of the factory and the massive tax credits given to Musk's company have depleted "public services, resulting in potholed roads, overcrowded schools and insufficient affordable housing" (Carroll n. pag.).

The rural US West can thus also be considered as an integral node in the infrastructure of global capitalism that emerges out of a shifting demand for consumer goods and technology prompted by a collective anxiety and fear regarding global warming and environmental catastrophe. While these rural hinterlands are intrinsically linked to the demands, desires, and fears of transnational urban communities and spaces – its landscapes characterized by "factory farms," "massive logistic complexes," "power regeneration," and extractive industries (Neel 17) – such "extractive zones" (Goméz-Barris) are also often ignored and disavowed in popular imaginations and understandings of the rural US West.

Architect Rem Koolhaas's recent work on the rural seemingly addresses this disavowal of the rural as relatively isolated from the structural workings of urban and global capitalism. In the opening words to the pamphlet accompanying his highly anticipated 2020 collaborative exhibition at the NYC Guggenheim – titled *Countryside, The Future* – he poses critical questions regarding the contemporary insistence on ignoring the rural. He warns his audience about the dangers of considering the countryside as nothing more than a "back house for urban civilization" that services the majority of humankind living in "2 percent of the earth's 'overpopulated surface'" (Koolhaas 3). He further reflects, albeit briefly, on the environmental costs at which this exploitative designation of the rural has come. The pamphlet articulates an anxiety, worry, and general angst regarding the unsustainable, and even dystopian, future into

which "we" are heading by solely focusing on the project of what Koolhaas terms "Total Urbanization" (2–3). In his insistent invocation of a "we" that is facing this "Total Urbanization," he asserts the need and desire for this "we" to rediscover the countryside as a "place to *resettle*, to stay alive; enthusiastic human presence must reanimate it with new imagination," so that it will become a "base from which to make the world a better place" (Koolhaas 3, emphasis added). It is in this "we," and in the implied exodus from urban to rural space, that one can read Koolhaas's idealization of urbanites as rational, enlightened subjects of modernity called upon to lead the way to a *resettlement* of a disavowed and forgotten non-urban space that has a distinctly colonial flavor.

The pamphlet reveals a predilection to fall back on a settler colonial grammar when imagining humanity's way out of crisis through the rural. This disavows the fact that rural communities might actually have experience with managing the violence and crises of globalization, and that they historically and presently have a stake in thinking and imagining their futures and that of the environment they live with. In light of this disavowal, it is unsurprising that Koolhaas dedicated a large display section on the Guggenheim's uppermost floor to the TRIC as an example of how he envisions the future of the countryside. In the pamphlet, the architect professes his admiration for the TRIC:

> Nature, unmolested. Rolling hills covered in light green vegetation, wild horses run in the distance. … TRIC, … a corporate utopia of instant permits here that enable a brave new architecture to be realized in record time, without bureaucratic interference. … We are programmed to think that any 'next' architecture can only be the outcome of a struggle. … [But] because it takes place in the countryside, this is a *stealth revolution* … TRIC: *a rare virgin birth*? The buildings here are not for humans but for things and machines. … It is post-human … There is *nothing*. (Koolhaas 272–273, emphasis added)

As Felicity D. Scott points out in her analysis of the exhibition, Koolhaas unironically praises the TRIC's "virility" as a project that recolonizes an empty, "unmolested" land as part of what he imagines as a post-human future dedicated to things and machines (n. pag.). The rural is perceived by Koolhaas as a space where "there is nothing," and where a "stealth revolution" falsely implies that radical change is happening without struggle or opposition, and outside of urban and state – and thus non-human – oversight (when in fact the TRIC is a huge beneficiary of federal tax programs). Koolhaas occludes both the human desires that drive the establishment and expansion of sites such as the

TRIC, and its material costs, which threaten the livelihoods and environments of many, including Indigenous Americans (the Nevada Shoshone and Paiute) in the region. Moreover, designating the TRIC as offspring of a rare virgin birth feminizes the rural US West through a typical settler colonial understanding that poses the land as an essentially "feminine" and "mothering" Other (Kolodny 4), a bounty ripe for the taking by capitalism's imperial agents (the actual subjects whose interest is predominantly being served in this highly technologized space).

Koolhaas's *Countryside, The Future* is then not so much a turn to the rural as a recalibration and reimagination of capitalism's and colonialism's spatiotemporal scales and rhythms. If anything, in its admiration of the TRIC it refuses to critically examine or change the imagination of the non-urban US West as anything more than a highly gendered, sexualized, and racialized space of extraction. The above vignettes – from Bezos's Blue Origin launch to Musk's Gigafactory 1 and Koolhaas's *Countryside, The Future* – show how the genre-specific promises of the western frontier continue to shape contemporary answers to the sociopolitical and environmental crises capitalism produces. The centering of the white pioneering subject, the sexual, gendered, and racialized tropes used in imagining non-urban space (including outer space), and the spatiotemporal construction of the rural US West in popular narratives regarding climate action and crisis can be seen as affectively managing a set of anxieties associated with the threatened future of global capitalism. Attachments to these ruralities are, to use Lauren Berlant's term, cruelly optimistic: for example, while this imagined rural US West is promised as a frontier of sustainability and hopefulness, the material impact "green" technologies – e.g. ion-lithium batteries and electric cars – have on rural environments and people (locally and globally) actively obstructs the possibility of the less destructive futures people might desire. The imagination of green, extraplanetary, and posthuman futures involves a turn towards an older settler genre of rurality that occludes the history and the present of widespread pollution, environmental ruination, and socioeconomic precarity, as well as the onto-epistemological erasure of Indigenous Americans that these much-heralded projects both necessitate and produce.

In what follows, I further investigate this contemporary reliance on historical genres of US West rurality through a close analysis of the SF film *Interstellar* (2014), asking: how is settler colonial desire reanimated in times where capitalist violence and climate change continue to actively impede on fantasies of normativity and progress? The first part of my analysis is particularly concerned with the sense of historicity the western frontier rural – including the farmstead and the frontiersman – manages in relation to the film's imagined

negotiation of climate crisis and humanity's envisioned future. The chapter draws out the structural and historical occlusions produced by the film's reiteration of the rural US West within the racialized and exceptionalist affective order of settler triumph and nostalgia that characterized the 1930s social realist photographic archive of the US Farm Security Administration (FSA). In the second part of my analysis, which is concerned with the narrative resolution of the film and its genre-specific use of western frontier rurality, I argue that the supposed concern with climate change – the film's engagement with eco-anxiety and its contemporary realities – is more so a compounded and latent concern over the loss of property, hetero-reproductivity, and progress.

2 *Interstellar*: Farm at the End of the World

Directed by Christopher Nolan, *Interstellar* is set in a not-too-distant dystopian future and follows Cooper (Matthew McConaughey), a former space pilot and engineer who has been forced to take on a job as a farmer. Together with his young daughter Murph (Mackenzie Foy), his teenage son Tom (Timothée Chalamet), and his father-in-law Donald (John Lithgow), Cooper lives on a farmstead in rural Colorado where he grows many acres of corn. With an ongoing blight and continuous dust storms that have made food extremely scarce, the US – much to Cooper's dismay – has turned away from scientific innovation and space exploration to make farming its prime socioeconomic focus. After mysteriously discovering a binary code with his daughter that leads him to a covert NASA base hidden in the boondocks of the US West, the rugged renegade leads a team of astronauts off Earth as they travel through a wormhole in search of a new home for humankind.

Despite its non-linear narrative structure, *Interstellar* upholds a normative teleological conception of time in which the rural US West plays an important role. The film opens with a close-up of a dusty bookshelf (Figure 7.1). The camera slowly glides along the books to where two miniature spacecraft models sit on the shelf's edge. The soft light and long shadows, the dust falling down against the light, and the array of inert books and toys conjure a sense of tranquility and stasis. It is as if the viewer is gazing upon the past: encapsulated, still, and gathering dust. The books connote a sense of historicity that is then transferred to the miniature spacecraft models, as if the technology on display here also belongs to a bygone moment. As the title of the film appears and then slowly fades to black, the voice of an anonymous narrator cuts through: "Well, my dad was a farmer." A talking head shot depicting an elderly white

FIGURE 7.1 Screenshot from *Interstellar*

woman – who towards the end of the film is revealed to be the older version of Murph (Ellen Burnstyn) – follows. The woman looks slightly to the side of the camera as she tells an unidentified interviewer: "Like everybody else was back then." The scene constructs the rural as a nostalgic childhood home (Williams 1973). Moreover, the past tense in which (the thus far anonymous) Murph narrates prompts the audience to frame what they are about to view as an historical experience; together with the opening shot, it facilitates a temporal focalization of a diegetic present tense looking back on a past.

The next scene starts with Cooper, in the diegetic past, being woken from a nightmare by a young Murph. He slowly gets up as soft morning light shines through his bedroom window. A vague outline of the landscape can be spotted. Cooper moves closer to the window to reveal a dirt-road running along a cornfield, with a single electrical pole standing on the side of the road. Through a long shot, an expansive rural landscape of miles and miles of corn comes into view, accompanied by a faint golden hue of first morning light appearing behind the hills that sit on the horizon. The soundtrack swells to a hopeful climax. The shot establishes the rural as peaceful and quiet, idyllic in a general sense. But with promises of progress beckoning on the dawning horizon, it also invokes this rural more specifically as a frontier idyll: a domestic safe haven from where the "proprietorial subject" (Bhandar 163) can envision the future.

Elderly Murph's narration, however, cuts back in to disrupt this comforting understanding of the rural: "The wheat had died." Her words are trailed by a close-up of cornstalks wavering amidst a starting dust storm. "The blight came and we all had to burn it. And we still had corn. We had acres of corn." The film cuts back to Murph, "but, uh … mostly we had dust." This is followed by various talking head shots of other anonymous elderly narrators, filmed with

FIGURE 7.2 Screenshots from *Interstellar*

an identical chiaroscuro lighting (Figure 7.2, top left).[4] After Murph speaks, an elderly white woman continues, "We wore little strips of sheet, sometimes over our nose and mouths so we wouldn't breathe in so much of it," as we see Donald sweep dust and dirt off the porch while ominous dark clouds gather in the background (Figure 7.2, top right). Another older white man recalls: "When we would set the table we always set the plate upside down … glasses or cups, whatever it was, upside down," followed by a shot of a dusty kitchen tabletop and plates being placed upside down (Figure 7.2, bottom left and right). Together, the imagery of the rural farmstead encumbered by climate change and the elderly narrators' memories of the overwhelming presence of dust construct a dystopian image of the frontier idyll under threat. Moreover, much like in the genre of the Western, the environment and the climate appear here as an Other, a wilderness, that threatens the settler colonial Self as symbolized by both the rural domestic property pictured and the white narrators reflecting on their harrowing experiences.

The particular intimacy that is generated through the chiaroscuro lighting and documentary-style narration, together with the older age of the interviewees, affirms these characters as authentic historical narrators. In actuality, the interviewees that follow Murph are subjects from Ken Burns's documentary miniseries *The Dust Bowl* (2012).[5] While one might read the inclusion of

4 The interview scenes are also all filmed in a different aspect ratio than the rest of the film.

5 Burns's documentary explores the Dust Bowl, a human-made ecological event caused by nineteenth- and twentieth-century white settlers who conducted extensive deep plowing of

testimony material from Burns's documentary as "a historical metaphor" that makes legible precedents of climate change and the Anthropocene (Jenner 104), the narration provided by the documentary's witnesses is indistinguishable from that of the fictional older Murph. The film's use of historical narrative here is then primarily affective in function as it manages a sense of historical authenticity. This temporally orients the viewer in order to evoke a futurity that implies humanity found some way to overcome the environmental menace threatening Cooper, his family, and his rural property in the film's diegetic past. The feeling of "historical embeddedness" (Berlant 2011: 66) establishes a sense of being able to look back on climate change as something that has passed. Situating the threat of climate change in the rural, an area popularly understood as spatiotemporally backwards, further strengthens the notion that this threat belongs to another space and time than that of the intended urban viewer. In other words, from its very first moments *Interstellar* attempts to temper an eco-anxiety – a "generalized sense that the ecological foundations of existence are in the process of collapse" (Albrecht qtd. in Panu 4) – by proposing that the viewer's present-cum-near-future of environmental doom is manageable if not solvable.

A particular optimism thus inhibits the dystopian narrative early on, and the film's subsequent depiction of the rural US West can be read as part of the "triumphalist narrative framework" (Kollin 8) characteristic of western frontier fictions. Triumphalism is historically embedded in dominant national discourses about the western frontier, most importantly Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 "frontier thesis," which argues that "American individualism and democracy were shaped by the experience of the western wilderness in a dialectic of man and an 'environment which is at first too strong for him'" (Turner qtd. in Borden and Essman 35). Turner's argument that the experience of settlers and rural life on the frontier engendered traits of resilience, resourcefulness, individualism, and inventiveness contributed to a popular understanding of the US West and its people as a blueprint for US national exceptionalism, and legitimized the nation's push for capitalist progress and colonial expansion.

Interstellar draws on another, related seminal imaginary of the rural US West to facilitate its sense of hope and triumph in the face of environmental doom. In its dystopian imagery of dust-swept rural towns, ruined farmsteads, and worn-out rural folk on the run, the film again harks back to the Dust Bowl,

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virgin topsoil in the Great Plains. The Dust Bowl was characterized by severe drought and dust storms that affected large stretches of the US West and Southwest, and that, together with the effects of the stock market crash of 1929, ushered in the Great Depression, leading to the mass migration of tens of thousands of rural families in the 1930s.

specifically evoking the social realist work of photographers Arthur Rothstein and Dorothea Lange, and filmmaker Pare Lorentz, who – under the supervision of the US Farm Security Administration (FSA) – captured the human despair across the region during the 1930s. While many of the photographers employed by the FSA also took pictures of people of color, the FSA's director, Roy Striker, chose mainly portraitures and pictures that depicted the Great Depression's main victims as white Americans. In "Whitewashing the Great Depression," Sarah Boxer traces the history of how the FSA's "preeminent photographic record of [the 1930s] eclipsed people of color and shaped the nation's self-image … that the soul of America, the real American type, is rural and white" (102). In referencing this archive, *Interstellar* – both in its depiction of rural quotidian life amidst oppressive conditions and in its muted coloring – strips away a sense of artifice that "replicate[s] the appearance of genres closely associated with the everyday and the ordinary" (Hallam and Marshment 108). This creates a strong juxtaposition between human and nature, as the film's social realist focus on capturing the hardships endured by white rural folk amidst precarious environmental conditions reaffirms a sense of racialized human exceptionalism and highlights traits of resilience and strength. As such, the film also plays into the nostalgic national metanarrative of the frontier – as posited by, e.g., Turner and Theodore Roosevelt – as a space shaping the essential characteristics of the American people: mobility, optimism, inventiveness, individualism, toughness, and resourcefulness.[6] Both the social realist imagination and the Western's frontier imagination centralize a story of resilience primarily associated with whites and, in turn, occlude the particular structural dynamics that cause the genocide of Indigenous people, mass displacement, and climate disaster in the first place.

As implied by the above-discussed temporal focalization and triumphant narrative, *Interstellar* suggests that its subjects have (safely) moved on from their dystopian rural past. Ann Laura Stoler poses that movement forward

6 Roosevelt and Turner shared ideas about the (white) national identarian significance of the frontier and westward expansion that built on a long tradition of European settler colonial thinking (Slotkin). In addition, both Turner and Roosevelt sought to sediment the frontier affectively as a *geography of optimism* in the face of its anticipated disappearance as agrarian property: "To [the material problem of the disappearing frontier Turner and Roosevelt] offered a conceptual antidote: an interpretation of the frontier past that might serve as the source of some saving wisdom which would allow an essential part of the frontier past to survive in the postfrontier future. [Their] portrayals of the frontier show a division of sentiment between nostalgia for the lost world of the frontier past, and an optimistic determination to see the progressive dynamic of the frontier carried forward into the new century" (Slotkin 609).

towards a better and more civilized future is, per the Euro-American colonial imagination, secured through a "rough and rugged cohort" of white masculine imperial agents (27). Turner's frontier thesis, building on the yeoman farmer ideal of Jeffersonian democracy, also romanticized the white masculine pioneering farmer as a purveyor of American civilization. Cooper, the hero of *Interstellar*, appears as a contemporary invocation of these idealized masculine subjects that historically and imaginatively roam the frontiers of the US empire: the pioneer and the renegade.

These tropes are particularly important in terms of how the film merges techno-utopian elements of SF with leitmotifs from the Western to facilitate a fantasy of the good life that caters, ultimately, to hegemonic sensibilities geared towards unambiguous narrative resolution. As mentioned before, Cooper lives in a rural society that has disavowed scientific innovation and space exploration in favor of large-scale sustenance farming as the manner of attempting to ward off ecological collapse. In a conversation between Cooper and his father-in-law Donald, the latter intimates that the current rural society, which encourages farming and a more conservative way of life, is the result of a highly urbanized past – alluding to the audience's present – in which consumerism and a dangerous desire for technology and progress led to the crisis humanity is now facing.

Cooper – who was an engineer and pilot in this past – lamentingly responds: "we have forgotten who we are … explorers, pioneers, caretakers. … We used to look up at the sky and wonder about our place in the stars. Now, we just look down and worry about our place in the dirt." Here, the film positions Cooper as a heroic subject dissatisfied with and unwilling to give in to a way of dealing with crisis that is unspectacular and mundane. As Shannon Winnubst argues,

> out of crises come heroes, those who meet crisis with courage and, in true superhero form, wrangle it, manage it, and lay it to rest. Crises makes our adrenaline flow, giving us the hyperaesthetic stimulation that makes life meaningful in the overdeveloped world: may we all have the opportunity to be Superman – or, at least, to catapult him into action. Crises feeds our craving for spectacle, complete with its clear narrative arc of beginning, middle, and end. (15)

Contextualizing Cooper's lament as a dissatisfaction with the loss of a time and place in which the techno-pioneering spirit was appreciated – in which he was able to be seen and valued as a hero – anticipates the film's movement towards spectacular individualized resolution and away from a "staying with

the trouble" (Haraway 1) that entails the always unfinished work of looking down and back to "our place in the dirt."

At this point in the film, Cooper is clearly frustrated with the lack of a scientific vision that, according to him, could resolve the crisis humanity is facing. As Yvonne Tasker writes about the cinematic Western, the hero "is often cast as a figure who lacks a place within the community for which he fights" (77), trying to restore order to a world from which he feels somewhat alienated. In the film's US, it is not just Cooper who has been sidelined; NASA – the prime harbinger of Western science, technology, and innovation – has been forced to operate covertly, its base hidden from state oversight somewhere in the wilderness of the US West. In effect, the film situates Cooper and his understanding of science and technology, which is normative in the world of many viewers, as a rebellious but righteous force that, as Jonna Eagle poses, "draws upon a long-standing inclination to align the Western and its hero against institutionalized forms of authority" (98).

In this sense, the film reflects the manner in which figures like Bezos and Musk also tend to be situated and situate themselves as renegade pioneers in opposition to institutional and legislative bodies in their pursuit of capital accumulation, while upholding the narrative that they are invested in providing a better and safer future for humanity. By making the dystopian rural epistemologically backwards and unable to restore normativity, and by portraying Cooper as an Enlightened renegade seeking to protect Western neoliberal modernity, the film constructs an imagination of futurity that vacates the rural from meaningful political potential and reinforces attachments to masculinized lawless subjectivities that move humanity into US exceptionalist visions of settler futurity.

Skipping over some of the plot, Cooper – as anticipated – eventually is able to save humanity. Some decades have passed since humanity left a dying Earth behind and Cooper finds himself, through some spacetime anomaly, waking up on one of the space stations not a day older than when he left the dystopian rural US West. Mirroring the opening scene in which Cooper awakes and walks towards the window observing the tranquil but threatened countryside, on the space station he observers a techno-utopian idyll (Figure 7.3): an upwards curving territory which, from back to front, features lush green pastures and farms, a residential neighborhood, and kids playing a game of baseball. Unlike the opening scene, the rural is now situated as a fertile backdrop; it is an idyllic-looking *over there* that services the (sub) urban core.

In this imagination of the future US rural, *Interstellar* mimics Rick Guidice's artistic renditions of the O'Neill cylinder (Figure 7.4), a speculative space settlement concept proposed by the American physicist Gerard K. O'Neill in his

FIGURE 7.3 Screenshot from *Interstellar*

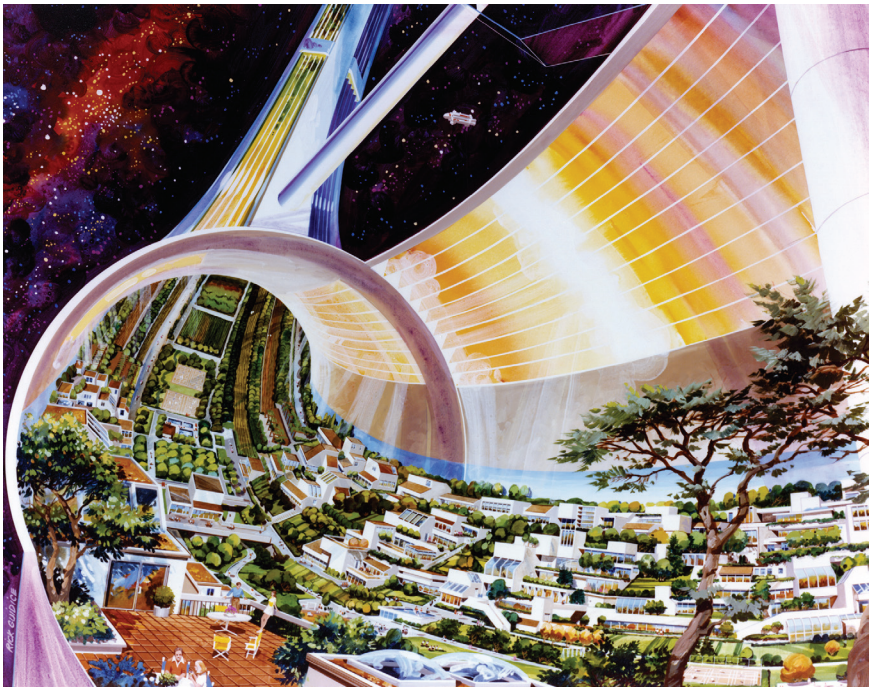

FIGURE 7.4 Cutaway view, exposing the interior (1977). Art work: Rick Guidice
CREDIT: NASA AMES RESEARCH CENTER

1976 book *The High Frontier: Human Colonies in Space*. In the film's reference to this canonic imagery, it produces a techno-utopian rural image that not only draws on the seductive qualities of Euro-American pastoral idylls but also on those of white and heteronormative suburban fantasies (see Siddiqi). Much like O'Neill's vision, *Interstellar*'s idyllic space cylinders make invisible the

structures of power and processes of labor and material extraction needed to facilitate such speculative realities. Bezos, too, has referenced the O'Neill cylinders as a direct influence on his visions of space colonization, in which the extractive logics, human costs, and structural exploitation needed to uphold such a project remain similarly invisible.

Significantly, Cooper's old farmstead also reappears on the space station when he is taken to a heritage site and museum that is a replica of his former property. As he approaches the farmstead, the audience sees the former property positioned in front of a curving wall of lush pasture. Compared to earlier images of the farmstead under siege by the climate, this replica looks clean and static, almost pristinely so, bathed in artificial sunlight. As Cooper approaches the farmstead, a museum display can be observed that is showing the testimonies by Murph and the Dust Bowl survivors that opened the film. This affirms the earlier intimation that the earthly threats of climate change and environmental degradation have been relegated to the past, together with the regressive socio-political order of the rural. The musealized reproduction of the farmstead reinforces the promise of triumphant settler-cum-capitalist progress and nostalgic heteronormative domesticity through an affective historicization of the rural US West as a foundational site of struggle between white settler subjects and Nature.

In this way, *Interstellar*'s speculative imagination of the future is exemplary of how genres of western US rurality perform powerful affective-historical labor in the contemporary assuaging of eco-anxiety. Nevertheless, while the musealized frontier farmstead affectively and spatiotemporally stratifies a rural-urban binary and teleology of progress – further obfuscating the structural violence at play in attempts to materialize such myths – something is still askew. For one, while Cooper might have ensured humanity's exodus from Earth onto the space cylinders, towards the end of the film (with his farmstead musealized) he is no longer a property-holding subject. Moreover, from the outset of the film, Cooper is a widower and his children are motherless. The figure of the dead mother in *Interstellar* can also be read as mirroring nature's inability to reproduce. Nature and land are thus gendered as female and, according to a colonial and heteropatriarchal logic, given up on or in need of replacement when they are no longer able to fulfill the reproductive – i.e. extractive – demands of capitalism (Jenner). While Cooper's elderly but dying daughter Murph ends up providing multiple generations of children and grandchildren, thus signifying (to a certain extent) the continuation of a heteronormative social order on the space cylinder, Cooper himself remains a single and soon-to-be childless father. Lastly, the space cylinder which has provided humanity refuge from a dying Earth is a landless, transient, and thus,

by settler logic, failing entity unable to sustain the promise of progress through the possession of land as (private) property and its extraction as resource commodity.[7] In this way, the narrative and affective resolution *Interstellar* works towards in its closing scenes needs to be read as fueled by the anxious desire to restore the reproductive capacities of capitalism, settler colonialism, *and* heteropatriarchy.

In the film's final scene, Cooper, encouraged by the dying words of his daughter, prepares an expedition to leave the space station and find his love interest, Dr. Amelia Brand (Anne Hathaway). Dr. Brand, as part of Cooper's earlier mission, was forced to execute the alternative plan of making her way to the planet that seemed most attuned to the project of human colonization. Murph reveals to Cooper that Dr. Brand has in fact made it to this potentially habitable planet and is thus alive somewhere in the galaxy. The viewer is then presented with a scene that depicts Dr. Brand standing on an elevation overlooking a desert-like terrain with dramatic rock formations. This terrain is reminiscent of the landscapes mythologized by the cinematic genre of the Western, such as Monument Valley, as well as the rural geography Cooper and his family fled. Murph's voice-over and a melodramatic soundtrack accompany this imagery: "She's out there setting up camp. Alone in a strange galaxy. Maybe right now she's settling in for the long nap by the light of our new sun, in our new home." Dr. Brand overlooks this new frontier, her face dusty and her expression tired, and then walks off towards a small, ambiently lit encampment with a US flag wavering in the wind (Figure 7.5). The next shot captures Cooper as he straps himself into the pilot seat of a spaceship, his face hopeful and decided. Dr. Brand is portrayed as waiting ("settling in for the long nap"), while Cooper's determined look foreshadows his departure from the civilized (i.e. urbanized) space station and his arrival on this frontier to realize the romantic reunification of the (white) heterosexual couple and the fruitful settler colonization of a new planet.

This final frontier image promises the well-rehearsed colonial gendering of the extraplanetary hinterland as fertile and female through the literal placement of Dr. Brand in the soon-to-be settled landscape. Interestingly, woman is imagined here as imperial agent – after all, Dr. Brand has successfully set up a camp with multiple tents and the national flag standing tall – but not as possessing the virility to propel the extractive, reproductive, and proprietary

7 As Brenna Bhandar asserts, "the control and possession of land is central to colonial endeavors, primarily because of the main objective of colonial rule, which is resource extraction" (n. pag.).

FIGURE 7.5 Screenshot from *Interstellar*

relations to the land necessary to facilitate settler-capitalist continuity.[8] The film relies on the well-rehearsed tropes of the strenuous, mobile, and forward-oriented hero of the Western to narratively resolve the existential crisis of the settler collective, or, rather, to assuage social anxieties over the loss of generic good-life fantasies and normative subjectivity.

Moreover, when looking closer at the above still (Figure 7.5), it becomes clear that *Interstellar* returns to an imagination of a future landscape that brings together the aesthetic and affective archive of the US western rural and wilderness. In its situating of the lone, heroic, settler and the tenderly-lit camp – the spaceship figuring as the pioneers' caravan – amidst the arid and mountainous landscape, the image not only reiterates the cinematic Western but also the work of nineteenth-century romanticist painters of the US western sublime such as Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran. Simultaneously, an earlier close-up of Brand's weary and dusty face together with the overall warm and desaturated color grading of the final scene, as well as the contrast between the epic environment and the small encampment, situates this closing image within the earlier-discussed social realist and anthropocentric aesthetic of the

8 Significantly, an earlier scene reveals that part of Dr. Brand's mission is to safeguard a repository of embryos that she will be responsible for nurturing once a habitable planet is found. While this intimates that, in some sense, she could defy the drive for heteronormative modes of reproduction and complicate this speculative imagination of settler colonization, the anticipated arrival of Cooper at Brand's camp underscores the heteromasculine drive that saturates settler colonial imaginaries.

FSA's photographic output of the 1930s. While some of its particularities might be reimagined, the reiteration of the general aesthetic and narrative grammars that structure the cultural imagination of the rural US West continue to play a significant role precisely because it offers a historically and affectively legible genre of spatialized subjectivity that creates "continuity with the precrisis world" (Berlant 2005: 60).

It is no surprise, then, that a film like *Interstellar*, popular exhibitions like Koolhaas's *Countryside, The Future*, and men like Bezos and Musk draw on these settler colonial genres of rurality and structures of feeling in times of crisis, as they provide an affective adjustment that seems to ensure comfortable and historical legibility for a collective settler future. While the rural frontier genre of US West thus manages a sense of continuity with the supposed "precrisis world" for some, it is also evident that this sense of settler historicity affectively occludes how the precrisis world of settlers is and was always already the ordinary crisis world of Indigenous subjects, more-than-human entities, and those others sooner or later made disposable through the insidious recursive power that defines the interweave of capitalism, heteropatriarchy, and settler colonialism. There is thus an urgent need for critics, researchers, audiences, producers, creatives, and institutions alike to not merely interrupt or shift the particularities of treacherous good-life genres, such as those pertaining to the rural US West, but to more actively, critically, and creatively contribute to the affective obliteration of generic settler constellations of worldmaking.

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