Settlement

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Cultural Studies has a way of thinking about strangers that goes something like this. First, it posits that we used to live in homogeneous, face-to-face communities in which we knew each other more or less intimately and strangers were readily identifiable outsiders; now, we live in communities of a different scale and mix where we are all structurally strangers to each other. (This is a restatement of Tönnies distinction between Gemeinschaft, community, and Gesellschaft, society.)¹ Second, it goes on to propose that our former habits of sociability and suspicion of strangers persist and are dysfunctional, tending to give rise to forced homogeneities and an ethnically-based politics of identity which undermine the political imperative of living with difference. Finally, it concludes that a cosmopolitan politics based on welcoming heterogeneity and overcoming parochial narrowness is the only ethically and pragmatically viable way of coping with the constitutive role of the stranger in our world.
Now, I don’t necessarily disagree with any of these propositions and much of the argument is probably even true; but I’m not going to write the article that would embody this argument, because I disagree with some of its assumptions. In particular, I note that it depends upon positing an ‘us’ who do or don’t welcome ‘them’, the strangers; I myself am not positioned as a stranger in this argument. This means that it doesn’t really come to terms with the reality of a world in which we are all each other’s strangers, or rather where familiarity and strangeness constantly intermingle and the positions of native and stranger change depending on context. And it accepts the historical reality of the homogeneous, face-to-face community. These are assumptions I’d like at least to unsettle. I begin my actual article, then, by talking about notions of the settled and the unsettled: that is, with the idea of settlement in each of its three major senses: as a place of human habitation; as a fixed and stable order of habitation; and as a political consensus reconciling fractious groups.

For precise historical reasons that I shall clarify shortly, I take the parish, rather than the village, as a figure of settlement in the first two of these senses. A parish is an ecclesiastical administrative unit, traditionally covering roughly the area of a European village; it gives rise to terms and phrases such as ‘parochial’ and ‘the parish pump’ which indicate something of the narrowness and mundaneness we associate with it. The English word ‘parish’ is ultimately derived from the Greek paroikos, made up of para + oikos, ‘dwelling beside or near, neighbouring’, which becomes the Hellenistic Greek paroikia, ‘dwelling temporarily or sojourning in a foreign land’: an expatriate community, a gathering of strangers. In the Septuagint it refers to the Jewish diaspora, and in the New Testament to earthly life understood as a temporary dwelling. It acquires its present meaning, an administrative subdivision of the church, in the fourth century AD. Paradoxically, then, it begins its existence with a meaning that is at least partly counter to its later usage as the centre of known life and the place to which one is born.

The idea of the parish derives its social and figurative resonance in the English-speaking world from the administrative functions given it by the Elizabethan poor laws of 1598 and 1601. These laws established a national system of poor relief delivered and overseen at this local level where personal and impersonal modes of giving are fused; as Hindle puts it, ‘the novelty of the late sixteenth-century
legislation lay ... in the incorporation of ancient principles of charity into a rate-funded administrative system that placed a legal obligation on each parish to supplement the incomes of those whose idleness was involuntary'.2 The legislation is part of the developing system of centralised but devolved state administration that Foucault calls governmentality, and it works by defining community obligations by way of opposition to the stranger. Indeed, you could say that its politics of belonging depends upon the creation of its own class of strangers, since the Tudor poor laws, largely governed by policy towards law and order,3 inextricably combine the functions of providing relief and harrying vagrancy. As Raymond Williams notes:

Much of the actual purpose of the laws against vagrancy was to force the landless to work for wages, in the new organization of the economy. But this was rationalized, through the organization of relief on a parochial basis, as the duty of people to care for their own, for their neighbours; but then only for their own. The idea of settlement, and then of paternal care, was counterposed to the ideas of mobility, of the wandering ‘sturdy rogues’, the free labourers.4

These laws follow a long mediaeval history of licences and certificates—essentially internal passports—which regulated the mobility of labour and of potential dissidents, and required even retrenched retainers and discharged soldiers and sailors to have passes to cross the country to their own parish.5 The new regime consolidates the parish as the place of legal settlement, and thereby, in a social Imaginary that persists for centuries, as a stable focus of familiar ways of doing things and of organic and reciprocal social relations. The parish feeds and buries its own, but its code of hospitality requires the stranger—whoever is not born and settled in the parish—to pass on to his own parish, or to be an outcast within.

‘Settlement’ in this simultaneously legal and social sense is always difficult to define accurately because populations never stay still. Birth or marriage are the primary qualifications, but a series of laws from the fifteenth century onwards add others based on property and residence. These are codified in the Poor Relief Act of 1662,6 which notoriously makes it legal to expel people without a settlement in the parish on the mere suspicion that they might become a charge upon the rates.
The settled man or woman and the vagrant, the wanderer, are thus defined by their mutual opposition; each depends for its identity on the other. Melling notes that:

The Quarter Session records in Kent contain many references ... to paupers being ‘settled and provided for’ in a certain parish, to a pauper being sent to ‘the place of his last legal settlement’, or to there being no obligation on a parish to relieve a child it being ‘neither born nor settled’ in a particular parish. The justices in Kent made frequent orders for the removal of paupers from one parish to another.7

Here are two examples of court rulings from seventeenth-century Kent:

a) Whereas Philipp North was taken vagrant at Gillingham in this countie and was whipped and by order of the justices of the peace of the said countie was sent to Feversham in the said countie, where he was borne, according to the statute in that case provided and being by vertue of the said order and warrant of the said justices delivered at Feversham, aforesaid, to the churchwardens and overseeres there to be kept and provided for according to lawe, the said churchwardens and overseeres did refuse to receive the said North contrary to the statute in that case provided and uppon receipt he, the said North, by vertue of the said order of the said justices, was whipped by the order of the mayor of Feversham and sent back to Gillingham, aforesaid, contrary to law, where it is ordered by this court that the said Phillipp North be forthwith sent back to Feversham, aforesaid, there to be kept and to remayne, according to the forme of the statute in that case made and provided.8

b) Whereas George Smith, Mary Smith and Eve Smith, three poore children, the eldest of them not being above six yeares old, by force or colour of pass bearing date the nineth day of December in the yeare of our Lord, one thousand six hundred ninety and eight, under the hands and scales of two justices of the peace of Southampton, were sent and conveyed from constable to constable and from officer to officer from Southampton, by and thro’ the county of Kent, unto the city and county of Canterbury and soe after, by warrant under the hands and scales of two justices of the peace of Canterbury, were sent back again to Southampton
and soe have been sent from Southampton to Canterbury through this county eight several times and are likely to bee soe sent forwards and backwards during their lives, to the greate and apparent wrong of the said children and the charge of the countryes thro’ which they pass and repasse, contrary to all law and reason, unless some course be taken to prevent the same for the future; wee therefore his Majestie’s justices of the peace for the said county of Kent, being desirous as much as in us lyes to put a stop to soe greate a mischiefe, have at our said sessions examined the case and doe find that the first sending of the said three children was Southampton to Canterbury by force of the said pass ... which said first sending wee conceive to be utterly unlawfull, neither can wee upon examinacion find any reason why they should be sent to Canterbury where they have noe father, mother nor any relacion that wee can heare of, neither were they or any of them ever at Canterbury before they were sent as aforesaid. It is therefore hereby ordered...

The three little Smith children, having endured the bureaucratic nightmare of being ceaselessly passed back and forth between the two cities, are prevented from being further returned to Canterbury, where they have no family—although there is no indication that they do have family in Southampton and one can suspect that the Kentish magistrates may be motivated simply by a desire to keep the children out of the county. The parish in which the vagrant Philip North is legally settled is required to have the care of him in order that he may cease to be a vagrant—a displaced or placeless person, a taxonomic anomaly. In each of these cases settlement is a problem rather than the organic status that the law takes it to be.

It is the ambivalence of the notion of settlement that Raymond Williams foregrounds in his extended analysis, in The Country and the City, of its affective hold and its foreclosure of the place of the Other in its constitution. ‘Around the idea of settlement’, he writes, ‘a real structure of values has grown. It draws on many deep and persistent feelings: an identification with the people among whom we grew up; an attachment to the place, the landscape, in which we first lived and learned to see.’ Williams then relates this to his own feelings by shifting to talking about the village where he grew up:
When I go back to that country, I feel a recovery of a particular kind of life, which appears, at times, as an inescapable identity, a more positive connection than I have known elsewhere. Many other men feel like this, of their own native places, and the strength of the idea of settlement, old and new, is then positive and unquestioned. But the problem has always been, for most people, how to go on living where they are.10

The issue Williams raises is not just that the idea of settlement tends to overlook the consequences of social and economic change—the enforced mobility of disrupted populations—but that there is a kind of dishonesty in the idealisation of the settled community, ‘an insolent indifference to most people’s needs’.11 Traditional accounts of settlement depend, with a kind of pastoral nostalgia, upon a view of abstraction and social complexity as in themselves harmful that leaves little room for human change. Even Williams’ account of mobile privatisation invokes ‘the breakdown and dissolution of older and smaller kinds of settlement and productive labour’,12 where the word ‘settlement’ resonates with the sense of an organic social order. The structure of value is simply loaded in favour of the closed group, with its ‘established ties of kinship, locality, and occupation’,13 into which the stranger intrudes.

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Into which a stranger intrudes whose status as stranger is created by the closed community. Strangeness is the opposite of a settled condition: the stranger is the one who disrupts settlement, who unsettles an order. It is in terms of taxonomic disorder that both Simmel and Bauman characterise the stranger.14 For Georg Simmel, the stranger is the synthetic unity of wandering and its conceptual opposite, fixation in space; the stranger is thus not one who arrives and leaves, but one who, coming to stay, nevertheless remains ‘a potential wanderer: although he has not moved on, he has not quite overcome the freedom of coming and going’.15 The stranger thus has ‘the specific character of mobility’, and if this mobility takes place within a closed group it ‘embodies that synthesis of nearness and distance which constitutes the formal position of the stranger’.16 The freedom of entry into and departure from the settled group enjoyed by the stranger has as its counterpart indifference toward him, and the price of his freedom is thus his solitude within the
crowd. In this sense there is a direct correspondence between the stranger and the city, since in the complexity of city life 'one grows accustomed to continual abstractions, to indifference towards that which is spatially closest and to an intimate relationship to that which is spatially very far removed'. One has only an abstract relation to the stranger, since 'with the stranger one has only certain more general qualities in common, whereas the relation to more organically connected persons is based on the commonness of specific differences from merely general features'. Simmel's conception prefigures (and doubtless flows into) Sartre's notion of the group constituted by seriality: a 'plurality of isolations' united by a common but abstract interest (waiting in a queue for the bus, for example) and organised in a contingent and non-reciprocal relation of interchangeability of each with each Other.

Zygmunt Bauman picks up on the notion of the stranger's structural ambivalence. Social organisation is designed to reduce taxonomic ambiguity by assigning boundaries, and it treats the stranger as belonging to an order which is not yet known to us. Yet the true stranger is not merely the as-yet-undecided, the unfamiliar, but is, in principle, an undecided, 'not just unclassified but unclassifiable'. In a world divided between two archetypal principles of sociation, those of the friend and the enemy, the stranger resembles neither one, or rather he may resemble either: 'He made his way into the life-world uninvited, thereby casting me on the receiving side of his initiative, making me into the object of his action of which he is the subject: all this ... is a notorious mark of the enemy. Yet, unlike other, “straightforward” enemies, he is not kept at a secure distance, nor on the other side of the battleline'. The stranger is thus the bearer of incongruity, of anomaly: 'He stands between friend and enemy, order and chaos, the inside and the outside. He stands for the treacherousness of friends, for the cunning disguise of the enemies, for fallibility of order, vulnerability of the inside'.

In the Imaginary Bauman is exploring here, the stranger belongs to the urban world of abstraction and complexity. Where the 'dense sociability' of the premodern, small-scale community is built around the poles of friendship and enmity, in the city there is 'a divorce between physical density and dense sociability'. The city represents a universalisation of strangerhood. Here is a classic nineteenth-century description:
A city such as London, where a man might wander for hours at a time without reaching the beginning of the end, without meeting the slightest hint which could lead to the inference that there is open country within reach, is a strange thing. This colossal centralization, this heaping together of two and a half million human beings in one place, has multiplied the power of this two and a half million a hundredfold ... But the sacrifices which all this has cost become apparent later. After roaming the streets of the capital for a day or two, making headway with difficulty through the human turmoil and the endless lines of vehicles, after visiting the slums of the metropolis, one realizes for the first time that these Londoners have been forced to sacrifice the best qualities of their human nature, in order to bring about all the marvels of civilization which crowd their city ... The very turmoil of the streets has something repulsive about it, something against which human nature rebels. The hundreds of thousands of people from every class and rank crowding past each other—are they not all human beings with the same qualities and powers, and with the same interest in being happy? ... And still they crowd by one another as though they had nothing in common, nothing to do with one another, and their only agreement is the tacit one that each keep to his own side of the pavement, so as not to delay the opposing stream of the crowd, while no man seeks to honour another with so much as a glance. The brutal indifference, the unfeeling isolation of each within his private concerns, becomes the more repellant and offensive the more these individuals are crowded together in a limited space.25

The crowd of strangers that Engels here describes is one of the great tropes of the literature on modernity, and it registers something of the shock that the loss of human scale in the great cities of industrial modernity brings with it. Yet this whole dichotomy—the traditional settlement represented by the parish, and the lonely crowd of the city—is unworkably stark. The parish is not only built upon the exclusion of the stranger but is actively informed by the excluded space of those other parishes in which the stranger has the status of a native. Moreover, far from being a kind of essence of the local, the parish is shot through and through with otherness and abstraction, informed and structured by the shaping authority of
religion, the state, capital, and the law. Conversely, the city of modernity is never simply composed of abstraction and non-reciprocal relations, never simply the opposite of the local, because its inhabitants work tirelessly to make its strangeness familiar. ‘Most people’, as Meaghan Morris argues, ‘still participate in parochial circuits of affect and belonging: family, sport, and, since it is possible to inhabit institutions and professions or trades in parochial ways, the distribution of employment (and lack of it) are just three of the forces that work to keep us grounded and emotionally bounded’. The difference between familiarity and strangeness is one of scale, not of kind.

Moreover, if at one level the parish and the city represent very different forms of relation to the stranger, a relation of exteriority and a relation of interiority, at another level each functions as a mechanism of exclusion of otherness. Rather than the vagabond, the key forms taken by the institutionalised stranger in our world are those of the migrant, the refugee, and indigenous and ethnic minorities. Bauman argues, indeed, that ‘the national state is designed primarily to deal with the problem of strangers, not enemies’, and it does so by positing as a norm the cultural homogeneity of the settled or the settlers. Yet this is likewise too simple, because recognition and incorporation of the stranger is an important function of the nation state. On the one hand the legal migrant or refugee is held up in societies such as the United States and Australia as a model of aspirational adaptation, ‘a supplement to the nation, an agent of national reenchantment that might rescue the regime from corruption and return it to its first principles’, but in ways that preserve the priority of the home culture. The very success of the migrant in integrating into their adoptive home reinforces the liberal call to assimilation which undermines the stigmatisation of the stranger in the same movement in which it also undoes their strangeness. The illegal migrant is similarly a structural moment of countries such as the US and France, since, as Bonnie Honig argues, ‘illegal migration is not only controlled by the state; it is simultaneously enabled, covertly courted, often managed, and certainly tolerated by it. Established citizens profit from the subsidies that cheap migrant labour provides to their child-care costs and food prices’. The treatment of illegal migrants, including refugees, differs from country to country, but that ambivalence (or, one might as well say, that hypocrisy) is characteristic of most Western countries.
If in one sense every politics is a politics of exclusion and belonging, the imperative for us must be to develop a politics based on a relation to the stranger which is neither one of exclusion nor of complete absorption. The starting point for the ‘counterpolitics of foreignness’ that Honig envisages is an argument that ‘democracy is always about living with strangers ... democracy is about being mobilised into action periodically with and on behalf of people who are surely opaque to us and often unknown to us’. The stranger is internal to the polity, each of us is each other’s stranger, and the role of the outsider then becomes crucial to the construction of an alternative politics. Yet this model, admirable as it is in its attempt to begin with the fact of strangeness rather than an assumed commonality, nevertheless repeats that assimilative move of the liberal politics of diversity: a move based on ‘our’ reception of ‘them’ and on considerations of the contribution that ‘they’ might make to ‘our’ polity. It’s a move that continues to shape Australian multiculturalism.

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I want to conclude, not by offering anything as grand as a counterpolitics, but by exploring a quite different kind of representation of the relation between the stranger and the closed community. My text is a drawing by the nineteenth-century Indigenous Australian artist Tommy McRae, done about 1890 and titled *Corroboree, or William Buckley and Dancers from the Wathaurong People* (figure 1). The picture is inscribed on paper in ink and ochre, a pigment used in ritual body ornamentation and in traditional bark paintings. The image depicts the escaped convict William Buckley, deported to Australia as part of that great expulsion of the dangerous classes from the English order of things (an expulsion to which the Smith children and Philip North might have been subject had they lived at a later time), who lived among the Indigenous Wathaurong people of Victoria from 1803 to 1835—‘going native’, as the phrase has it, to the extent that he had forgotten his own language by the time he joined the group of white settler-invaders who founded Melbourne. Part of the legend that has grown up around him tells that the Aboriginal people he encountered took him for their ancestor, Murrangurk, and treated him as sacred. Most representations of Buckley show the moment at which a wild-looking man, heavily bearded and dressed in furs, encounters his own people again (that figure...
owes much to representations of Robinson Crusoe); this image is unusual in representing Buckley living among the Indigenous people who sheltered him.

The picture is made up of two planes which have no contact with each other.33 At the top, floating like the transcendental kingdom of God in an early mediaeval painting, is a fully rigged ship, flags streaming in the wind. With its menacing aspect it could be a warship; it is certainly an alien and intrusive presence in relation to the dancing men, a figure of European invasion; and it may also function as a kind of spatial narrative, indicating the convict transport from which Buckley had escaped. In the bottom half of the picture, we see a row of thirteen dancers, one white and twelve black—a significant numerology in the Christian tradition. Eleven of the black dancers and the white dancer are carrying small flags on sticks, in such a way that they seem to protrude from their heads; the twelfth black dancer occupies an
anomalous space at the far right, and carries two flags on sticks in his hands. The white dancer, too, occupies an anomalous space, separated from the dancers to his right and left by a greater space than is to be found between the black dancers. Buckley's legs, and those of the dancer to his left, are unobscured, whereas those of the other dancers overlap in an almost geometric pattern.

Despite the separation of the two planes—sea and land, the unsettled alien world of the ship and indigenous belonging—and although the dancers have their backs turned to the ship, as though refusing everything it stands for, several features tie the two planes together. The most obvious is the way the flags carried by the dancers repeat the three flags streaming above the ship. Another is the fact that Buckley is wearing a sailor's hat, and looks almost as though he is dancing a hornpipe. But his dancing pose, with legs akimbo and the calves covered in brush-like leggings, is not that of the hornpipe but that of a quite different kind of dance. This is a community of men to which Buckley belongs, in whose ceremonial corroboree he is participating as an equal. His belonging is that of a stranger, someone marked by difference of colour and dress and by the space of isolation in which he stands. Yet his outcast status in the white world has gained him acceptance in this world; he is at once a member of it and slightly to one side of it, perhaps even—as the flags and the sailor's hat seem to indicate—poised between the two.

Note the high degree of formalisation of these figures: their rigid stance, and their array as a set of varied repetitions within a pattern. The major point of variation is in the direction of the heads: reading from the right, the first three figures, including Buckley, are looking to their right; the next five look to their left, then two to the right, and three to the left. The faces are all in full profile, which means that the five dancers to the right of the first group are looking at Buckley and his two immediate companions; but this is not so much, I think, about relations—of looking and belonging—within the group of dancers, as it is about the relation between the dancers and us who are looking at them, for whom they form a pictorial arrangement—and, indeed, one which in its formalised stiffness has a strong element of comedy. These, we could say, are not so much men, certainly not individualised men (with the partial exception of Buckley), as they are actors in a ceremony.
In the complex relationships it sets up both within the group of dancers and between the dancers and the ship, the drawing unsets and complicates our assumptions about who the stranger is in our world: who is an outsider, and what it means to belong. Rather than showing a community of the privileged in which the unprivileged—the migrant, the refugee—is accepted, it shows one kind of outsider in the midst of those other outsiders who have been removed, or who will soon be removed, from their country. Buckley is multiply a stranger: in the white world from which he has escaped; in the Aboriginal world where he has a peripheral belonging; and in that world as it exists within the interstices of the white world. Even within this community of dancers, however, there are partial insiders and outsiders: it is not only Buckley but also the dancer to his left who occupy an anomalous space, a certain solitude in the midst of this group. McRae makes it clear that this is not unproblematically a community; we might invoke here Ian McLean’s account of Bennelong’s difficult and wily negotiation of relations between Indigenous inhabitants and settler-invaders on the one hand, and on the other among the mutually antagonistic clans of the Sydney Cove area whom he persuaded into a settlement with Governor Phillip. Yet what the picture offers us, for all its unblinking recognition of tensions, is clearly, still, a community, and we could read the image, counterfactually, as a vision of an Australia in which white men had been accepted, almost as equals, by its Indigenous inhabitants. The ironic force of its vision of community—of a ‘settlement’ in the third sense of that word, a political arrangement reconciling fractious groups—lies precisely in its counterfactuality. This is what might have been. This is how McRae in 1890 envisaged a world and its disappearance. And this is how we might, again, begin to imagine a settlement with the stranger.

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NOTES

6 Poor Relief Act of 1662, 14 Cha II c.12.
7 Elizabeth Melling (ed.), Kentish Sources IV: The Poor, Kent County Council, Maidstone, 1964, p. 25.
8 Ibid., p. 24.
9 Ibid., pp. 71–2.
10 Williams, The Country and the City, p. 84.
11 Ibid.
14 This paragraph repeats material used in my essay 'The City at Human Scale', Critical Quarterly, vol. 51, no. 4, 2009, pp. 37–49.
16 Ibid., pp. 403–4.
22 Ibid., p. 59.
23 Ibid., p. 61.
24 Ibid., p. 62.
27 Bauman, p. 63.

Bauman, p. 69.

Honig, p. 97.


Nicholas Thomas suggests that 'it is not even clear that these images are intended to constitute one composition', although whether it is even possible to dissociate the two planes entirely is a perhaps unanswerable question. Nicholas Thomas, 'Aboriginal Artists of the Nineteenth Century' (review of Andrew Sayers, *Aboriginal Artists of the Nineteenth Century*), *Oceania*, vol. 66, no. 4, 1996, p. 331.

Ian McLean, 'Bennelong’s Gambit: The Aboriginal Invention of Modernism', in Renata Summo-O’Connell (ed.), *Imagined Australia: Reflections Around the Reciprocal Construction of Identity Between Australia and Europe*, Peter Lang, Bern, 2009, pp. 187–99. The first Australian parishes were established in Sydney and Parramatta in 1802 and were a central part of Sydney’s transition from penal colony to colony.