KNIR DIALOGUES ONLINE 1 (2025)
Settler Colonialism as a Structure?

KNIR
ROYAL NETHERLANDS
INSTITUTE IN ROME

Unsettling: The Vulgar Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*) and the Anxieties of Settler Colonialism

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Introducing the Starling

On March 6, 1890, a bird-loving New Yorker named Eugene Schieffelin (1827-1906) released a crate containing a hundred European starlings into Manhattan's Central Park. His goal? Writing fifty-eight years later, in 1948, the naturalist Edwin Way Teale (1899-1980), author of prize-winning memoirs centered on tens of thousands of miles of road trips across America, claimed that Schieffelin was a fan of William Shakespeare (1564-1616) and wanted to introduce to the United States all the birds that the great Bard had mentioned. In the 1850s, American birders had already let loose the European house sparrow (*Passer domesticus*). The starling's turn had come next.

The tale of the Central Park starlings became more elaborate – and bitter – with time as it circulated among professional and amateur ornithologists. In 2021, two literary scholars, Lauren Fugate and John MacNeill Miller, published an article in the journal *Environmental Humanities* tracing this story-turned-legend, which increasingly portrayed Schieffelin as an agent of "environmental devastation" and the starlings as a blight (Fugate and Miller 2021, 311). In 2022, *The New York Times* covered the story as well, noting the starlings' impact on aviation. In 1960, it reported, a flock of starlings caused an airplane to crash *en route* from Boston to Philadelphia, leaving sixty-two people dead. This incident marked a "turning point" in aviation safety, with efforts to deter bird flocks from runways and flight paths. But the newspaper also noted that starlings had many "admirable qualities" and had a reputation that was ready for a "reboot" (Bittel 2022).

As for Schieffelin, the story-turned-legend went roughly like this: Eugene Shieffelin was a fool. He introduced an invasive species that took over America at the expense of native birds. Starlings were avian opportunists who bred with abandon while causing millions of dollars of damage to U.S. farmers every year by pecking at fruits, corn, and other crops. Their antisocial behavior extended to acoustic pollution. Equally at home in woods and city lots, they banded together and caused a ruckus with their singing. Starlings were "vulgar" creatures, in the English sense of being both common, as their Latin name *Sturnus vulgaris* suggested, and crude, as in brutish.

How does this story about the starling in America relate to the essays in this volume about settler colonialism? Simply put, all share recurrent tropes and discourses that reveal ideologies and anxieties about others moving in – or moving out. The cases covered here focus on the species *Homo sapiens*, whose members migrated and settled (or thought of settling) in places extending from the

How to cite: H.J. Sharkey, 'Unsettling: The Vulgar Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*) and the Anxieties of Settler Colonialism', in: J. Pelgrom and C. Six (eds), *Settler Colonialism as a Structure?* (Rome, KNIR Dialogues Online 1, 2025): www.knir.it/dialogues-online/1/2025/Sharkey

Roman empire in Greece and Gaul in the first century BCE, to seventeenth-century Batavia (now Indonesia), eighteenth-century Pennsylvania and its environs, and, in the nineteenth century, the reclaimed peat bogs of the Drenthe region of northeastern Netherlands. Continuing, the case studies stretch to the early twentieth century Levant (now Israel and Palestine) and finally, in the early twenty-first century, outer space, so far somewhere between Earth and its moon in the direction of Mars. These stories touch on big issues: immigration and anti-immigrant sentiment; class and ethnic bias; eugenics and notions of evolutionary progression or regression; and apocalyptic imaginings. Together they illuminate what I would call the psycho-political dimensions of settler colonialism: its modes of displacing others while leaving some people "unsettled", meaning deprived of "fixity and quiet" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2024) and left uneasy and apprehensive. By juxtaposing the evolving saga of the starling to these case studies, we can more clearly see settler colonialism, not just as a process of physical movement and home-building, but as a set of contested narratives and agendas advanced by vested parties.

Writing in this volume about the attitudes of nineteenth-century Dutch planners who drained swamps to secure land for new settlement, Maarten Zwiers cites the work of Thom Van Dooren, Eben Kirksey, and Ursula Münster who have called for a "multispecies approach" to history. As they see it, this approach can go beyond humans to consider other life forms while addressing "colonialism, capitalism, and their associated unequal power relations … within a broader web of life" (Van Dooren, Kirksey, and Münster 2016, 3). I suggest taking a multispecies approach for different reasons: to study, as Dinah Wouters stressed here while analyzing the writings of the Dutch East India Company official Pieter van Hoorn (1619-1682) in Batavia, the "crucial role of intellectual discourses" as opposed to material factors and demographic forces in shaping the politics of settler colonialism. Departing from the case of the starling, I apply a multispecies approach to the history of ideas to suggest that we can see how discussions of settlers and settlement have expressed xenophobia among humans in the form of a series of "-isms" like nativism, jingoism (as an intensely partisan form of nationalism), and classism (often entailing disdain for people deemed poorer and less cultured). At the same time, I suggest that we should more closely and routinely examine ecology in discussions of settler colonialism, by recognizing flora and fauna, landscapes and waterscapes, and even weather conditions as protagonists in our accounts. We need, in short, to recognize the "more than human world" (Abram 1996) in our assessments of settler colonialism and in the study of history at large.

Annoying Shits, or Beautiful Geniuses?

Several things about Schieffelin and starlings fascinated Fugate and Miller and prompted them to publish their 2021 article in *Environmental Humanities*. They were struck by outraged comments that some people left on Schieffelin's digital gravestone on the platform called "Find a Grave". This site proclaims a "mission … to help people from all over the world work together to find, record and present final disposition information as a virtual cemetery experience". In the "Flowers" section (intended for tributes), one irate person threatened to put suet feeders on Schieffelin's mausoleum "presumably as a way to entice flocks of starlings to shit on the grave of their enabler" (Fugate and Miller 2021, 308).

Fugate and Miller were also struck by inconsistent claims about damage that starlings wrought. Some studies suggested that starlings did *not* damage crops but instead protected them by eating insects. Were they pests, then, or benefactors? Not clear. Fugate and Miller also detected an odd discursive alliance between agribusiness leaders and environmentalists – conventional rivals who came together to decry Schieffelin and his legacy. Whose interests did that alliance serve? Agribusinesses, they concluded, suspecting that their anti-starling rhetoric served as a public relations maneuver.

Finally, Fugate and Miller were intrigued by the mix of fabrication and omission surrounding the story. They could find no evidence for Teale's claim about Schieffelin's love for Shakespeare as a rationale for releasing the starlings. They could only find that in 1916, ten years after Schieffelin's death and twenty-five years after his starling release, other people installed a Shakespeare Garden in Central Park to grow plants and flowers that the venerable playwright had mentioned – roses, honeysuckle, and so on. Meanwhile, dominant versions of the story – which circulated among bird lovers and not among New Yorkers per se – were missing two critical details. First, others had released starlings before Schieffelin. Second, these efforts sprang from convictions about evolutionary science – a point to which I will return.

To be clear, Shakespeare *did* have an opinion about starlings: he thought that they were annoying and could drive people mad with their songs (Dunaway 2022). He gave the species a cameo role in *Henry IV*, Part 1, in a scene describing a plan to goad King Henry IV into action by getting the bird to squawk the same word – the name of his brother-in-law, Mortimer – into his ear as he slept. "Nay", the line goes, "I'll have a starling shall be taught to speak / Nothing but 'Mortimer', and give it him / To keep his anger still in motion."

Of course, one person's noise may be another person's music. In my own case, I have a "soft spot" for starlings, admiring their songs as well as their plumage. They do not disturb me, although the discourses around them do leave me rather … unsettled.

And now, for a disclaimer, or a confession: Before about 2017, I had often seen starlings in Pennsylvania but did not know them by name. I had frequently noticed the subtle, speckled iridescence

of their feathers – very beautiful – and the way they darted off in quick, sharp flights. If they sang, I did not notice it – or at least, I would not have been able to distinguish their song from those of other birds that frequented my front garden, such as robins (*Turdus migratorius*), Carolina wrens (*Thryothorus ludovicianus*) and Northern cardinals (*Cardinalis cardinalis*). I simply accepted the blur of bird songs as part of the sonic landscape.

My relationship to songbirds changed when our daughter, at age thirteen, started research for a science-fair project on the grammar of birdsong. She applied computational and mathematical analyses to sound recordings of zebra finches (*Taeniopygia guttata*) to detect recurrent patterns – "grammars" – in their songs. From her, I learned that starlings are avian intellectuals. They not only sing a lot; they also create long compositions of highly patterned complexity, using an array of sounds – variously described as whistles, warbles, tweets, and clicks – while sometimes mimicking other birds. Studies have shown that they can recognize other starlings by their songs, and that they can detect rhythm (Samuels et al, 2021). Starlings also fascinate biologists and mathematicians because they model a behavior called "murmuration". As a form of leaderless flocking, murmuration represents one of the "most stunning examples of collective behaviour" known among animals, showing a "spatial coherence … [with] extremely synchronized manoeuvres [that] seem to occur spontaneously" (King and Sumter 2012). Starling murmuration had fascinated the writer William Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) so much that he wrote a poem about it (Sourgen 2018).

The more I learned about starlings, the more they won my respect. Admittedly, I had another cause for bias in their favor: our daughter won a Best-in-Show gold medal at the regional Delaware Valley fair for her mathematical analysis of birdsong grammar. Bottom line? I now think of starlings as beautiful geniuses and recognize them when they zip by.

Settlers, Natives, Aliens

Schieffelin thought he was helping the cause of science when he released the starlings in 1890. He belonged to an organization called the American Acclimatization Society, which supported theories of evolution advanced by the French naturalist Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire (1772-1844) (Fugate and Miller 2021). This was the same Saint-Hilaire who joined Napoleon during his 1798 conquest of Egypt (along with a boatload of other scientists) and who moved among the great French naturalists of the age, including Jean-Baptiste Lamarck (1744-1829) and other precursors to Darwin. Coincidentally, Saint-Hilaire greeted the first live giraffe who came to France from the Sudan in 1826 – a creature, now known as "Zarafa", whose biography I have written (Sharkey 2015). This link to "my" giraffe through

Saint-Hilaire may further explain why I feel connected to Schieffelin's starlings, as though we belong to a common transhistorical "network" or "friend group".

Proponents of acclimatization believed that by introducing species to new environments – by "naturalizing" them – one could observe evolution in action. Others before Schieffelin, perhaps as early as the 1850s, had been releasing European starlings with the goal of acclimatizing them to America. While he may have helped starlings to settle in America, he was not the first to bring them in.

Attitudes towards environmental policy were changing by the time Schieffelin let the birds loose. In 1872, the first U.S. national park, Yellowstone, opened in Wyoming, founded on the idea of natural conservation. Never mind that the president who authorized the park was Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919), namesake of the teddy bear, a hunter who reveled in killing big mammals on a mammoth scale, whether bears and buffaloes in the American West or elephants and lions in the Sudan (Sharkey 2015, 18). A generation later, ten years after Schieffelin's Central Park release, Iowa senator John F. Lacey (1841-1913) introduced the Lacey Act, whose supporters specifically flagged European house sparrows and starlings as culprits. Passed by the U.S. Congress in 1900, the Lacey Act banned imports of "injurious wildlife", later called "invasive species". This law has remained "nearly intact" ever since, as a government scientist from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service noted in the journal of *Management of Biological Invasions* (Jewell 2020).

Another link in the evolving starling story came from an ornithologist named Frank Michler Chapman (1864-1945) of the American Museum of National History in New York, who knew Schieffelin and mentioned his experiment in his writings with an initially positive or neutral tone. As time went on, Chapman became increasingly critical, as in 1925 when he published an article, called "The European Starling as an American Citizen." His writings, Fugate and Miller observed, "track[ed] closely … shifts in American attitudes toward introduced species, demonstrating how stories about the starling's release were subject to larger political and cultural forces" (Fugate and Miller 2021, 309).

These forces included attitudes towards immigrants and foreigners that blended into environmentalist discourses during the twentieth century. In 1939, the marine biologist Rachel Carson (1907-1964), later acclaimed for her 1962 book *Silent Spring* which warned about the environmental devastation caused by pesticides, published an article entitled, "How about Citizenship Papers for the Starling?" Carson, whose efforts helped to inspire the foundation of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, took a positive line towards the starlings who had started out foreign but had integrated. "Shall we then continue to regard him as an alien", she asked, "or shall we conclude that his successful pioneering and his service in insect devastation entitle him to American citizenship?" Among the good things starlings did, Carson asserted, was to eat insects including "Japanese beetles" (Carson 1939). Written in the fateful year when World War II broke out, Carson's casual words, I suggest, hinted at

the discursive foundations of a popular American xenophobia that only deepened after Japan attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941.

Once again, I feel the need to issue a disclaimer, or a confession. Reading Carson's reference to Japanese beetles (*Popillia japonica*), which are a kind of scarab, stirred up memories and left me feeling, once again, unsettled. Her words reminded me of my childhood encounters with these little round creatures, with their beautiful copper and green bodies, although I do not recall seeing any of their species for many years now.

During my lifetime in the United States, I have observed scientists, government agencies, environmental groups, garden supply centers (that is, businesses), and ordinary "citizen scientists" direct stiff invective towards insects, even more than birds. Growing up in New Jersey, in a family that liked to garden in the summers, we sprayed "Japanese" beetles individually with poison on the grounds that they destroyed plants by eating their leaves. In the last ten years, attention has turned to another group of Asian invaders: Chinese spotted lanternflies (*Lycorma delicatula*), which have stunningly beautiful chocolate-brown bodies that open to show red-orange wings. In recent summers, on the nature trail close to our house, posters have advised hikers and bikers to kill this invasive species upon sight because they devastate local crops and cause millions of dollars of losses to the agricultural economy. (Sound familiar?) One recommended mode of killing is to bring a dish soap-and-water solution in a spray bottle and squirt them one by one; another is to flatten them with a fly swatter or simply squash them by foot. As an avid user of the trail who has limited entomological knowledge, I wonder: are we really saving our local landscapes and economies by killing Chinese spotted lanternflies? Are we doing our civic duty? Or are we merely projecting Sinophobia, however unconsciously, onto bugs?

The prospect is frightening. And yet, anti-Asian sentiment in the United States, which began with the first arrivals of Chinese workers in California after the Gold Rush of 1849, has a long history. These sentiments manifested themselves on the federal government level through laws and policies like the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1884 and the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 (which blocked almost all immigration from Asia and Africa). They continue today but now aim to deflect a broader array of migrants. How, then, do discourses about invasive species track or inspire discourses about aspiring settlers and what, in the end, do they mean? Is support for native plants and animals, and reciprocal attacks on species deemed foreign or invasive, propelled by science, xenophobia, or both (compare Tallamy 2015 and Goode 2016)? In short, how innocent has the language about flora and fauna been, and how has it driven attitudes and policies towards human "aliens" and immigrants?

In short, who or what is native or foreign, and who is a settler colonialist? When does a newcomer acclimatize, naturalize, or become "transplanted" enough to count as a local or to "belong"? Eluding easy answers, these questions are truly unsettling.



Settling, Invading, Resisting

The seven core essays in this volume examine settler colonialism from many perspectives. Below, I highlight some of their most striking insights.

Noting the tendency of most scholarship on settler colonialism to focus on case studies involving Europe and modern imperialism, Jeremia Pelgrom turns his sights to the ancient world. He discusses, *inter alia*, how settler colonialism often grew from what Plato (c. 428-348 BCE) regarded as "civic purges", as states exported undesirables. These often led to "eliminatory projects", which Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527) understood in terms of settlers' bids for collective preservation, by either mixing with people when they had to, or getting rid of them when they could. Among the ancient cases Pelgrom cites is one relating to the early Bronze Age (circa 3000 BCE) Yamnaya people in what is now Ukraine, whose migrations may have been "more replacive", or annihilatory, "than once thought".

Building on the model that Lorenzi Veracini developed in his book *The World Turned Inside Out* (2021), Jitse Daniels examines how Roman colonies depended on the resettlement of the poor as a means of avoiding revolutionary unrest closer to him. But installing settlers in colonies did more than just get rid of the excess. In the case of Julius Caesar, Daniels suggests another motive, too: "Caesar initiated a 'settler revolution' not to prevent a revolution at home, but to anchor his own", by making the landless poor happy and winning their loyalty relative to potential oligarch and middle-rank challengers. Settler colonialism thus became a populist maneuver – recalling, to my mind, a tactic that France used in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Algeria – and points to the importance of colonies for homeland politics.

Dinah Wouters examines a case that ran in the opposite direction: merchants of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) in seventeenth-century Java who blocked the settlement of other Dutch people because they did not want their own trade and culture monopolies challenged. Wouters takes an intellectual history approach to settler colonialism by pointing to the "reason of state" literature that Machiavelli and others developed as she analyzes how VOC representatives abroad negotiated their power and roles relative to the Netherlands.

One of the more sanguine stories in this collection comes from what is now Israel and Palestine. Karène Sanchez Summerer considers two men who lived in late Ottoman- and British Mandate-era Palestine: Albert Anteby (1869-1918), who, among other roles, served as a representative of the Jewish Colonization Society from 1899 to 1913, and Niqula Khoury (1885-1954). She calls them intermediaries who blurred, crossed, and defied social boundaries while thwarting efforts to "frame colonial encounters as a stark binary between settlers and indigenous populations." Treating people as



individuals in this way rather than as members of groups, we can see nuanced details of conflict but also of adaptation and cohabitation – in this case, at a moment when new settlers were entering the region but when elimination was not (yet) part of anyone's plan.

Mark L. Thompson sets our sights on eighteenth-century North America. Focusing mostly on the mid-Atlantic region that now corresponds to Delaware, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York, where many Swedish, English, Dutch, and German people settled, he broaches the issue of timing and indigenization. When did a European settler in that region become an "ancient" settler, as people used the term at that time, and what were the degrees and stages of becoming (more) native and therefore of having (more) claim to the territory? Thompson reminds us to recognize the heterogeneity of settler populations, the importance and perception of timing in waves of migration, and gradations of indigeneity.

Maarten Zwiers turns to the drained bogs of Drenthe in the nineteenth century, where Dutch leaders settled the urban poor, including those deemed vagrants and orphans, making city-dwellers into farmers. They achieved a civic purge in this scheme for social engineering and de-urbanization in a place they called the "Colonies of Benevolence". Strikingly, these planners looked to plantation models from Dutch colonies in the West Indies and the East Indies. They illustrated what Michel Foucault (1926-1984) called the "imperial boomerang" and modeled a kind of internal colonialism. As an internal civilizing mission, Zwiers adds, this project had far-reaching consequences not only for the people settled but for the ecosystems destroyed and remade.

Clemens Six turns our gaze to what Captain James Kirk, hero of the late 1960s American television series Star Trek would have called "Space: the final frontier". Six confronts us with the "elitist escapism" of SpaceX, the private space agency of Elon Musk (b. 1971), a South African settler in the United States, who aspires to make "life interplanetary" even as he wages internal American culture wars and wrangles to make profits on Earth. While some may question whether the exploits of SpaceX amount to settler colonialism, given that – as Six puts it – "there are no indigenous communities in outer space to be massacred", the discourses undoubtedly qualify. Elon Musk has voiced utopian fantasies about the Beyond, even if he has no intention of going there himself, instead "settling" for the prospect of ejecting others into space, if they can pay for the privilege. Musk's apocalyptic vision for settler colonialism as a long-term solution combines faith in technology with anxieties about looming environmental and social collapse.

Conclusion

As Jeremia Pelgrom and Clemens Six note in their introduction, interest in settler colonialism has grown so much that the subject has begun to form a field of its own. As a signal that it had "arrived", its practitioners founded in 2011 an international peer-reviewed journal on this subject. How this field "settles down", "colonizes" the intellectual landscape, or evolves, remains to be seen as scholars address the politics and historical dynamics of contested migrations, past and present. Meanwhile, contributors here present what they call a "mosaic" of lively case studies. Together, they present subtle intellectual and ideological histories of settler colonialism that challenge assumptions about who settlers and natives have been, and how they have interacted among themselves or with others, while pointing to directions for future research.



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