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'The Environment is Us': Settler Cartographies of Indigeneity and Blackness in Prophecy (1979)

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Title: 'The Environment is Us': Settler Cartographies of Indigeneity and Blackness in *Prophecy* (1979)

Introduction

In a *Sneak Previews* television review of the 1979 eco-revenge horror film *Prophecy* (dir. John Frankenheimer), Roger Ebert lambasts the film as unoriginal, stating that '*Prophecy* is the same tired old stuff, and the addition of topical issues like Indian rights, environmental protection, that doesn't change a thing. I think it was Gertrude Stein that said, 'A Godzilla is a Godzilla is a Godzilla.' Released in the midst of the 'Red Power' movement wherein Indigenous anti-colonial activism broke into the US mainstream, *Prophecy* may be the only big-budget environmental creature-feature films to depict ecological racism against living Indigenous peoples. *Prophecy* is also even more unique as it is one of the few films ever which directly compares ecological racism on Native American reservations to the experiences of Black people living in urban centers. These oversights notwithstanding, I think Ebert is ultimately right in his claim that *Prophecy* depicts the same 'tired old story,' but probably not in the way he intended.

Despite the film's efforts to render the experiences of Indigenous and Black peoples sympathetically, *Prophecy* has, like many other sf texts 'Unfortunately... mirrored rather than defied racial stereotypes...' (Lavender III 12). In this article, I show how *Prophecy* 'maps' racialized bodies into the spaces they inhabit in order to justify white surveillance, management, and dominance of Black and Indigenous peoples and lands. Although the film articulates a criticism of capitalist systems that exploit Black and Indigenous spaces and communities for the benefit of rich white subjects (the one group who is able to appropriately manage in all spaces), the film's representational schema also shows that US geographic and ecological imaginaries have been, and continue to be, imagined through unquestioned colonial racial hierarchies. In the end, Indigenous and Black peoples (especially Indigenous and Black mothers) are ultimately rendered

as abject because they live in uncivilized spaces, and, recursively, the spaces they occupy are uncivilized because they are occupied by non-white non-beings.

Prophecy thus becomes a text of interest because, through its failure, it shows how, as Black feminist geographer Katherine McKittrick writes ‘The geographies of the racial other are emptied out of life precisely because the *historical* constitution of these geographies has cast them as the lands of no one’ (7). I am interested not only in the ways that *Prophecy* falls back into settler-colonial humanist grammars which strategically collapses Indigenous and Black peoples into the land, but also in examining how this technique reveals that the production and maintenance of distance (geographic, ontological, cultural, ethical, and so on) is a fundamental function of the human which ultimately allows humanism to justify the conquest of those it deems to be non-human non-subjects. Isiah Lavender III writes that, “A fictional environment is the aggregate of perceived and lived space articulated through the author’s imagination,” and *Prophecy*’s fictional environment exposes settler-colonialism’s perception of how race and space inform one another (163). Through a series of strategic productions and eliminations of distance between white, Black, and Indigenous people and land, close analysis of the film *Prophecy* reveals how settler-colonial humanism manages geographic and ontological distance concurrently as a method to uphold white supremacist colonial hierarchies. These depictions are troubling and rectifying them will require not just the inclusion of Black and Indigenous peoples within narratives of ecology, but rather a more fundamental re-mapping of settler-colonialism’s ‘common sense’ understandings of place and being.

The Killings in the Forest: Indigenous Erasure, Settler Environmentalism, Anti-Indigenous Misogyny

To summarize the plot of film: *Prophecy* tells the story of Robert (Robert Foxworth) and Maggie Vern (Talia Shire), a white couple who are sent to investigate an environmental dispute between a paper company and the fictionalized Masaquoddy Indigenous tribe. Shortly after they arrive on the reservation, Robert and Maggie are terrorized by a giant bear whom the Indigenous ‘Opies’ refer to as Katahdin.¹ Through the course of their investigation, the pair also discover that they have also been exposed to the toxic chemical methylmercury, a chemical which has poisoned the local animals and water system. This exposure threatens the couple’s own reproductive future, as they cannot determine whether their own exposure has also compromised the health of the unborn child Maggie is carrying. Much of the film’s horror is derived from encounters with the monstrous Katahdin, herself a product of mercury contamination, and from Robert and Maggie’s concern that their as-yet unborn child will be born resembling Katahdin and her children.

Perhaps one reason why critics like Ebert see the inclusion of Indigenous peoples in the plot of *Prophecy* as an ‘addition’ is due to the fact that the screenplay disavows the narrative’s origins in real-life cases of environmental racism which occurred on Indigenous lands. *Prophecy*’s script was penned first as a novel by famed horror author David Seltzer who drew inspiration for the film from cases of environmental racism against Indigenous peoples in Canada. Seltzer’s screenplay plainly alludes to the poisoning of Minamata Bay, Japan. During this incident, industrial wastewater from the Chisso Corporation contaminated the Minamata Bay, leading to the deaths of over a thousand residents and the physical impairment of countless others. While this event is explicitly noted in the film, another similar ecological disaster haunts this narrative, one which is only alluded to briefly in screenwriter Seltzer’s novelization but of which the film remains curiously silent: In 1970, the Task Force on Organic Mercury in the Environment released a report showing that a Canadian paper company had dumped large quantities of methylmercury into the

water systems that sustained the Grassy Narrows and Whitedog First Nations.² The methylmercury contaminated the local fish, animals, and water systems, poisoning the human and animal residents of these reserves. These First Nations communities are still seeking redress for this incident, which has disconnected them from their traditional food sources, lowered life-spans, and resulted in economic devastation.³ The proximity of this event to Seltzer's writing of the script, the choice to locate the narrative in Maine – which is proximate to Grassy Narrows and Whitedog – and his allusion in his novelization strongly imply that these events informed his narrative choices in *Prophecy*.

It is concerning that, despite the ways the real-life contamination of Grassy Narrows and Whitedog reserves has informed the fictional setting of the film and novel, there is no explicit discussion of these real-life cases of ecological racism against Indigenous peoples in the film adaptation of *Prophecy*. The choice to omit discussion of these actual events and to set the action of the film on a fictitious reservation space figures Indigenous peoples, and the real-life violence they experience, not as real but rather as imagined 'apparitional excesses.' While not figured as literal ghosts using the tired horror trope of Indigenous haunting, the Indigenous community represented in *Prophecy* is speculative, figuring the elements of the plot as a possibility rather than a lived reality. Linking this technique of hypothetical Indigenous communities to Seneca scholar Michelle Raheja's discussion of American culture's technique of depicting Indigenous peoples as ghosts, *Prophecy's* speculative Indigenous Masaquoddys '...compel audiences to an emotional economy of guilt and remorse, but that does not serve contemporary Indigenous communities invested in visual technologies that reflect the creative, robust vitality of living people' (146-147). Put another way, these choices figure ecological racism against Indigenous peoples as a possibility rather than a fact and erasing Indigenous presence from their lands through genocide and acts of

discursive violence like renaming, fictionalization, and disavowal have long been noted by scholars as core mechanisms through which settler-colonialism (re)produces itself.⁴

In addition to obscuring the real-life attacks on Indigenous communities (which the film owes its entire plotline to), *Prophecy* fails to problematize its own vision of environmentalism. The narrative seeks to redeem and heroize the characters of Robert and Maggie by portraying their environmental efforts in a positive light, ignoring the underlying settler-colonial ideologies which inform this depiction. The film enacts what La Paperson calls ‘settler environmentalism,’ a framework which figures the land as ‘in pain’ and need of ‘rescue’ by a paternalistic, civilizing force of white cultivation (120). Robert and Maggie’s efforts to rescue and purify contaminated Indigenous lands are not seen as a colonial re-invasion, but instead are framed as a way for them to ‘help’ the Indigenous community by subjecting them to colonial systems of land and bodily management (La Paperson 117). In this way, Robert’s efforts to protect the space are also a way to claim to Indigenous lands as white man’s property: ‘greening...can mask a neoliberal curriculum of whitening’ (ibid).

While this environmental ethic is problematic for a variety of reasons, I want to focus in on two aspects which are key to note, as they run counter to the film’s surface-level sympathetic portrayal of Indigenous peoples. First, *Prophecy*’s ecological sensibilities are premised on a binaristic understanding of nature: either lands are pure and untouched, or they contaminated, uncultured, and in need of conservation. This is precisely the binary used to justify Robert’s colonial re-invasion of Masaquoddy land: on the surface the Masaquoddy reservation appears to be an untouched utopia; it is a romanticized space of hyperabundance, as evidenced by the oversized fish and long shots of sprawling green forest. M’Rai, the Opie Elder played by George Clutesi, shows Robert and Maggie ‘The Garden of Eden,’ a pure space which has kept secret from

all previous visitors. To the Indigenous Opies, the reservation seems hyperabundant and is brimming with life, as it ‘...provides more food than a man could possibly need,’ because animals and plants grow to an enormous size. Yet as Robert digs deeper, he uncovers what the film says the Opies are unable to perceive – that the animals are large not because they are pure but rather because they are contaminated by mercury. Thus, because Robert is able to properly study, map, and in a sense ‘read,’ the land and recognize its dangerous qualities, he becomes the only one capable of saving it.

A second issue with the film’s environmentalist ethics is that as the film figures Indigenous lands as uncivilized and savage, it moves Indigenous peoples to the periphery through the logics of primitivism. The film repeatedly depicts the Opie people - and especially the Opie women - as passive objects to be acted upon rather than agential subjects. In one sequence, Robert draws blood from the Opies in order to test their level of mercury exposure. Throughout the scene, the camera cuts to shots of the Opie women standing quietly, looking at Robert and Maggie as they collect the blood samples. The choice to depict the bodies of Indigenous women this way positions them as an extension of the unbridled nature of the reservation, a space which the film posits can only be properly managed by a white patriarchal system. This sequence emphasizes Robert’s agency and the Opie women’s lack. It is also important to note that Maggie is also placed within this hierarchy, as she is able to assist Robert in the collection of blood samples and plays a much more active role than the Opie women, who are primarily inert. Troublingly, the film thus ‘maps’ Indigenous peoples and lands identically: both are contaminated and uncivilized and thus in need of Robert’s paternalistic management in order to be ‘rescued.’

Because the Indigenous characters are understood as an extension of the land, they are also figured as simultaneously romanticized and savagely contaminated. Consistently, the film

represents the Opies, and particularly the Opie women, as not only non (re)productive, but dangerous to their children.⁵ Ramona (Victoria Racimo), the only Opie woman character who speaks in the film, reports to Robert that many of the Opie women have been experiencing stillbirths or other reproductive complications. She also hints that the Opie women are killing or abandoning children who exhibit symptoms of mercury poisoning. As the film progresses, there is less emphasis placed on a resolution for the Opies and more focus is placed on Maggie's reproductive concerns. The Indigenous women begin to simply function as a backdrop for the film's 'primary' drama, which is the threat the contaminated environment creates for a white settler heteronormative future.

The dynamic between active Robert and the inert Opie women is the product of same racial hierarchies through which the film maps Indigenous spaces. Throughout the narrative, Indigenous peoples are swept up into Robert's project of 'ecological purification' (read: land seizure), and their positioning as passive objects to be treated seeks to justify systems of patriarchal white supremacy. Such uneven positioning reveals that '...attachments to place and the capacity for ecological agency are dependent on the roles afforded to people by human systems' (Ruffin 53). Thus, *Prophecy's* white supremacist, paternalistic discourses map both Indigenous places *and* bodies as sites to be managed. Through this paternalistic and colonial framing, Robert's 'righteous' ecological mission to 'discover' the root of the contamination and 'purity' the land and its inhabitants both justifies his colonial intrusion and figures Indigenous peoples and lands as always already the property of white settlers.

Black and Indigenous critical geographies and theories of place have also shown how theories of subjectivity intersect with colonial mapping practices. Colonial geo-ontological boundaries are a way to generate and police boundaries of where it is safe and possible to live.

At the same time some spaces are marked livable, other spaces are marked as empty, dangerous, and/or uninhabitable, whether or not those spaces are being lived in by people already.

McKittrick notes that, 'Native reservations, plantations, and formal and informal segregations are just some of the ways the lands of no one were carved up to distinguish between and regulate the relations of indigenous, nonindigenous, African, and colonial communities, with some geographies still being cast as uninhabitable for particular groups' (6). In turn, 'Bodies are organized, categorized, surveilled, and made readable to the state by mapping national and non-national spaces and appointing the appropriate bodies in these spaces' (Goeman 36). There is thus a recursive relationship established between space and inhabitant: if one occupies a 'non-place,' they do so because they are a non-human, and if one is non-human, the place one inhabits becomes 'no place.' Through variations of this primitivist logic, Black and Indigenous people have been excluded from normative understandings of space because logics of anti-Blackness and conquest have rendered their ways of producing and relating to space as illegible, degenerate, and inhuman.

As noted above, the film *Prophecy* figures Indigenous women's relationships to their children as antagonistic and dangerous, and this anti-Indigenous and misogynistic logic also orients the audience's relationship to the film's monstrous antagonist Katahdin. Throughout the film and in promotional materials, the monster Katahdin is gendered as female and is closely aligned with the Indigenous Opie community. Although she, unlike the film's other Indigenous feminine characters, is an active agent within the film, her status as a degenerated, inhuman other means that she does not properly belong within any space in the narrative. Unassimilable into any categories, the bear-like creature Katahdin's unmappability throws colonial cartographies into crisis. This is a crisis common within sf-horror, wherein 'man confronts something he has never

had to confront before, a new creature, a new problem...’, a theme which, as we have seen, reenacts notions of colonial first contact (Murphy 35). Like the reservation land and the Opie women, Katahdin is both a figure of both possible salvation (‘awakened to protect us,’ M’rai says) and horrific degradation, ‘a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions’ (Cohen 6).

Katahdin’s body, like the bodies of the Opie women, is a visible relic of a temporally and biologically degenerated state of being. She is an especially threatening figure not only because of her embodiment: she, unlike the Opie women, is *active*. As a figure who violently resists Robert’s paternalistic maintenance of Indigenous spaces, she is positioned as a threat that must be destroyed so that colonial order can be restored. Partway through the film, when Robert discovers that the mill has contaminated the reservation’s water supply, he explains the origin of Katahdin, detailing the forces that led to her monstrous existence:

A developing fetus goes through certain distinct phases. Each phase represents a specific stage of evolution. The human fetus for instance at one stage it’s a fish – it looks like a fish it’s got fins and gills. At another it’s amphibian – webbed hands. At another it’s reptilian. At another feline. Developing upward in the distinct shapes and phases of the evolutionary scale. This chemical, methylmercury, adheres to the DNA...it could freeze certain parts at one certain evolutionary stage, while the other parts continue to grow.

According to Robert’s description, Katahdin is an assemblage, a being that resists classification within the narrative of the film but whose appearance most resembles a large bear. It is key, at this point, to note that Katahdin, in the film and in marketing materials, is continuously referred to using the female pronouns she and her. The choice to gender her in such a way, combined with her association with the Opies and their land, marks her as the film’s most abject figuration of Indigenous femininity. Like the other Indigenous women characters, she is presented as a helpless victim of ecological racism; However, is key to note that the process which led to her monstrous

anatomy is couched in the biological terms of evolution. Formulating evolution as a linear movement from primitive to civilized, Robert's monologue is premised on progressivist notions that abject Katahdin and position her as monstrous. Additionally, his explanation of the process of evolution closely resembles the writings of Ernst Haeckel, a German biologist who first coined the term 'ecology.' Haeckel's theories of evolution were high progressivist: in his work *Natürliche Schöpfungsgeschichte*, he argued for 'the biogenetic law that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. This principle holds that the embryo of a developing organism goes through the same morphological stages as the phylum went through in its evolutionary history' (Richards 502). This invocation of Haeckel further links *Prophecy's* entanglements of aestheticized forms of embodiment to progress. Such frameworks seek to make the bodies of racial others 'readable' so that seeing and knowing the racial other are the same act.

Such progressivist theories of evolution that link advancement to an aestheticized notion of embodiment have been used to render racialized subjects inhuman vis-à-vis their physical appearance. Zakiyyah Imani Jackson has critiqued Haeckel's work, which placed not only animals on a hierarchy of civilization but also *races*: 'Haeckel's signature articulation of progress in evolution asserted directly that the telos of evolution was evidenced in an observable, and Haeckel maintained, progressivist hierarchy of races' (172). For Haeckel, the work of the scientist was 'to hone skills of discernment necessary for delineating the metrics and scales given by nature,' meaning that evolutionary differences were both embodied and observable. Such a desire for science to be able to visually discern differences between species, according to Jackson, reveals that 'imperialist rationale drove a demand for a material basis of scientific evidence in *general* and was the engine of species designation in both humans and nonhumans' (173). That discourse surrounding species differentiation is deeply informed by, and informing, theories of white racial

supremacy thus ‘invites a reconsideration of the extent to which exigencies of racialization have preconditioned and prefigured modern discourses governing the nonhuman’ (Jackson 14). This is precisely the case in *Prophecy*, since the signs of Katahdin’s inhuman degeneracy are not only manifested visually, but her abjection is deeply entangled with the ways in which she is mapped as a racially inferior Indigenous other through her relationship to the space of the reservation and through her association with the other Indigenous women characters.

Like the Opie women who transmit mercury to the bodies of their children, Katahdin’s abjected, inhuman status also carries over to her offspring, a move which again marks Indigenous women as non-(re)productive non-beings. Depicted as skeletal and disfigured, Katahdin’s cubs physically resemble their mother and are thus read in the same ways. When Robert, Maggie, John (Armand Assante), and Ramona discover two of Katahdin’s cubs left abandoned in a fishing net, they decide to capture the beings and use them as evidence in their case against the mill. When they arrive at a nearby Opie village, Robert begins to treat one of the cubs, and as he does so, the cub begins to howl loudly. This scene, which allegorically depicts a white settler ‘rescuing’ an Indigenous child, re-enacts longstanding colonial ideologies. Indigenous women have long been represented as incompetent mothers, and Katahdin serves as an extreme example of this. Although Indigenous women are often represented as extensions of a fertile nature, colonial hierarchies have positioned Indigenous peoples at-large as wards of the state. Legally posited as wards of the state, Indigenous peoples are ‘perpetual children’ and thus incompetent parents. This has led to policies where Indigenous children are removed from their families and placed in either white-run boarding schools or adopted into non-Indigenous (primarily white) families.⁶ As horrific non-subjects under the care of a matriarch who has been deemed incompetent through the logics of settler-colonialism,

the only salvation for Katahdin's cubs arrives from their rescue by the white paternal forces which Robert embodies.

While at times the film depicts the Indigenous peoples and land sympathetically by showing the negative effects of environmental racism on these beings, it simultaneously takes up Social Darwinist narratives and figures ecological devastation as an inevitable result of their incivility. Because the Opies 'belong to a space in which violence routinely occurs, and...have a body that is routinely violated,' their relationship to place serves to naturalize their social conditions (Razack 93). Thus, as *Prophecy* engenders pity towards Indigenous peoples by depicting the horrors of environmental racism, it reproduces colonial cartographies of racial difference that normalize the premature death of Indigenous peoples and map Indigenous lands and peoples as permanently uncivilized and in need of colonial maintenance. As Cree scholar Billy Ray Belcourt writes, 'It is thus easy to think the reserve is bad for life because its members are bad at life' (1-2). Such is the discourse that *Prophecy* relies upon in order to tell its horrific story.

'The Interior Frontier': The Anti-Blackness of *Prophecy's* Environmental Ethics

Prophecy further entangles the associations between non-white bodies, degeneracy, and non-places by also figuring Black women and their children as degenerate. Visually and sonically, the film maps Black spaces and embodiment through the grammars of degeneracy and lack. In one of the film's first scenes, Robert enters a Black housing community in order to treat a Black child (uncredited) who has been attacked by rats. This is the only place in the film, narratively and geographically, where Black people are depicted. Before the audience enters the Black housing complex, the camera moves through a shot of the grand interior of Maggie's orchestral practice hall, past an Indigenous protest, before finally arrives in the Black housing complex. This movement mirrors the film's racial hierarchy, which places White spaces as the most developed

and ‘civilized.’ As soon as Robert’s car enters the complex, the mise-en-scene works to mark the space as underdeveloped. Black adults and children stand on the street awaiting Robert’s arrival, and a young Black child is shown jumping up and down on the abandoned husk of a car. The camera slowly zooms in, tracking Robert’s movements and drawing the viewer’s attention to Robert as he exits the ambulance and enters the building. The eyes of the neighborhood are also drawn to him, as several members of the crowd are shown looking at and approaching Robert. Reading the sequence’s use of cinematography, editing, and mise-en-scene, there is no sign of any sense of community, productivity, or coherence, signaling that this Black space may in fact *may not be any place at all*. Rather than belonging to modernity, the Black housing complex is associated with urbanity gone awry, a place where modernity could flourish if not for the incomprehensible disorder of Blackness, which seems to plunge the social relations of the space into chaos. Contradictorily existing within yet on the outskirts of modernity, this black space ‘serves as a dislocation for blackness, intimate to and yet necessarily cast out from the great metropolises of empire...the ghetto is imperialism's interior frontier...’ (Paperson 116). Mapped outside of civilization and progress, places where action happens, the Black mother (Lyvingston Holmes) tells Robert that her landlord ‘lives in Georgetown. He lives with those rich rats up there.’ Black space is geographically abjected and mapped outside of civilization and progress. Like the Indigenous reservation, *Prophecy* positions Black space in this way because it is understood to be a space disconnected from modernity, and this spatial disconnection from modernity serves – like the film’s depiction of Indigenous space – to recursively map the occupation of non-places as both cause and the effect of Black degeneracy.

Visually, the film marks Black space as disordered and uncivilized, but Black space is also rendered as abject through the film’s use of sound. As Robert jogs up the stairs, several men shout

at him and several older women are seen standing and talking at the entrance to the apartment. While the viewer can see these verbal interactions, the voices of the Black people in the scene do not register on the soundtrack. Instead, the soundtrack is dominated by the sounds of car alarms and music, reducing the sonic space to inscrutable, voiceless noise. While Robert ascends the stairs of the housing complex, the sound of music fades, becoming replaced with the sounds of a crying baby. The Black child's cries in this opening sequence serve to foreshadow the later cries of Katahdin's cubs. Like the screams of Katahdin's child, the Black child's screams come to dominate the soundtrack, associating Black spaces with illegible noise and, more specifically, the noise of pain and suffering. Sonically and visually, this sequence represents Blackness as chaos, noise, poverty, and degeneracy, concepts which are all 'incongruous with humanness' (McKittrick 6). The soundtrack of *Prophecy* signifies that this Black environment is incongruous with civilization, as the bodies which populate these spaces are unable to develop proper relationships with their environment and with one another. In this way, the Blackness is rendered as an unnatural form.

This encounter between Robert, the Black mother, and her baby portrays the Black mother as unable to care for her child autonomously. Additionally, the film seems to understand that, within white supremacy, Black women embody a form of maternity which does not allow them to possess their own children.⁷ Like Indigenous women, Black women are figured as incapable mothers because of their inability to assimilate into white-supremacist hierarchies. This unassimilability derives as much from their embodiment as non-white beings as it does their placement within spaces of degeneration. While the film expresses sympathy for the exploitation of Black and Indigenous bodies under capitalist modernity, this does not prevent the narrative from restaging the dispossession of Black and Indigenous mothers: Robert takes the child away for

treatment, and to serve as evidence in a civil suit against the landlord. After the mother and child leave and Robert returns home, the community is never depicted again. Just as the Black baby is set to function as evidence of her landlord's exploitative housing practices, this scene will be echoed when Katahdin's cubs are later also taken to prove the existence of the contamination.

Relegated to serve as evidence of the ecological violence that has already been proven, Black and Indigenous children become *specimens* rather than subjects. *Prophecy* is thus an sf-horror creature film that instrumentalizes scientific discourse as a marker of both civilization and progress, fields which the narrative maps as inaccessible to Black and Indigenous characters. They do not speak through the voice; only their flesh can be utilized as a visual index of a violence that only the film's White characters are able to ethically question. Black and Indigenous bodies, within the racial hierarchy of the film, cannot function as witnesses of violence against their own bodies, their own communities. Black and Indigenous mothers, and their children, cannot act in ways which would allow them to escape or successfully disrupt colonial hierarchies. Most troublingly, the film also does not offer any possibility to reunite Black and Indigenous children with their mothers.

Prophecy, despite its critique of capitalism's exploitative orientation towards space, is a narrative that does not question colonial constructions of space. Black and Indigenous places and bodies have, since colonial contact, been forcibly re-mapped through European Humanist conceptions of being and subsequently 'made into the physical referent of the idea of the irrational/subrational Human Other' (Wynter 226). Although Black and Indigenous places and peoples are portrayed as contemporaneous to White civilization, they are nonetheless situated outside of the narrative of civilized progress and, as a result, are subsequently understood to be irrecoverably degenerated forms of the human. Throughout the narrative of *Prophecy*, Black and

Indigenous peoples are aligned more closely with the film's ecological creatures rather than human beings. The creature in sf-horror is figured through and conterminously with race and gender. In this way, race, gender, and animality co-constitute one another within the sf-horror genre. In the context of *Prophecy*, Black and Indigenous ways of being are abjected through their rendering as 'animalistic' and 'inhuman', and this abjection serves as the justification for Robert's paternalistic, patriarchal, and white supremacist maintenance of Black and Indigenous bodies and places.

Although the film maps both Black and Indigenous people outside of humanity, it is important to note that Blackness and Indigeneity are made into irrational others by distinct grammars of representation. White supremacist colonial hierarchies render Black communities as placeless, always-already dispossessed, and furthermore incapable of – and uninterested in – developing meaningful relationships to place. Black relationships to place remain unrepresentable. Alternatively, as previously stated above, Indigenous communities are seen as belonging in nature – often to the extent that Indigenous peoples have been represented as *being* nature. However, Indigenous relationships to place have been rendered improper and illegible due to the ways they fail to conform to normative capitalist emphasis on property, private ownership, and economic development. Through logics of anti-Blackness and primitivism, colonialism has cast Black and Indigenous spaces as 'the lands of no one,' either because they are imagined as terra nullus, blank space, or because the lands themselves were deemed so uninhabitable that anyone living in them was not properly living. Through different logics – and sometimes at different times and places – '[Black and Indigenous] identities are made and remade as a perpetual limit point or outside the boundaries of Man' (King 15). It is worth emphasizing that while the discursive practices that mediate the colonial mapping of Black and Indigenous communities and subjectivities seem at

times to be a facsimile of one another (especially when we focus on the effects of these discourses), they are not equivalent.⁸

‘They Fought Too Late’: Troubling *Prophecy*’s Black and Indigenous Antagonisms

In addition to rendering Black and Indigenous places abject, *Prophecy* declares that any project which might seek to articulate Black and Indigenous relationships to place are antagonistic and irreconcilable with each other. After Robert and Maggie are shown the ‘Garden of Eden,’ the following exchange occurs:

John: Don’t mistake these tents for his home. His home was this whole forest.
 Robert: You know, just three days ago I was at a place where there were eleven people living in a single room.
 John: Oh yes?
 Robert: I just thought you should know
 John: What, that we are asking too much?
 Robert: That there are people in this world fighting for a single inch of living space.
 John: Yes, because they fought too late.

The inclusion of the exchange serves to position the Opies’ fight for sovereignty over their lands and the Black communities’ fight to articulate their relationships to space as antagonistic political projects. Here, the film figures the Opies’ struggle to regain their territories in colonial terms, as a remapping process which would also dispossess Black communities. John’s dismissive response that Black peoples’ fight for space is has begun ‘too late’ is also in line with the colonial worldview that Black peoples do not produce meaningful relationships to space. Here, the film conceptualizes Indigenous sovereignty in ways which analogize it with colonial mapping processes. This instrumentalization of sovereignty ‘allows the Settler/“Savage” struggle to appear as a conflict rather than as an antagonism’ by implying that Indigenous sovereignty movements share the same goals and grammars as colonial mapping projects (Wilderson 154). By rendering sovereignty in this way, the film shows that Indigenous relationships to space only become meaningful when rendered in legible colonial terms. *Prophecy* then also serves as a warning against articulating

Indigenous relationships to place through the terms of colonial recognition, as this grammar of representation bolsters white racial supremacy.⁹

It is especially key for Indigenous Studies to understand the way that *Prophecy's* instrumentalization of sovereignty reveals the need for anti-statist and anti-conservative mappings of Indigenous space. Rendering sovereignty in colonial terms is a move to trap Indigenous thought within a matrix of recognition that offers some legibility so long as indigeneity operates within colonial boundaries. Such a boundedness is antithetical to Indigenous critical thought, which understands that movement and change has always been a part of Indigenous histories, before, within, and beyond colonialism. Additionally, sovereignties guided by an anthropological gaze which situates authenticity in a fixed, prior, 'purer' point in time are also not the solution. Rather than being fixed, 'Native sovereignty is a living and dynamic concept in constant flux' (King 149). An Indigenous critical thinking that seeks to oppose not only colonialism but also anti-Blackness must understand that places and peoples co-constitute each other and that peoplehood and place are not terms to be naturalized and made unchangeable. 'It is our responsibility to interrogate our ever-changing Native epistemologies that frame our understanding of land and our relationships to other peoples... (re)mapping is not just about regaining what was lost and returning to an original and pure point in history, but instead understanding the processes that have defined our current spatialities in order to sustain vibrant Native futures,' writes Mishuana Goeman (2). The sovereign cartographies that Indigenous peoples collaboratively dream should seek to remap space, being, and the grammars of representation so that Native *and* Black lifeways can flourish. This does not mean that Black and Indigenous solidarities are not and will not be messy, complex, and difficult. Rather, what *Prophecy's* rendering of Native sovereignty makes clear is that to claim that such

solidarities are impossible enables settler subjects to instrumentalize an antagonism which has been used to buttress white supremacist worldviews.

Conclusion

Those who seek to dismantle colonial systems must first understand how and why white supremacist patriarchal colonial logics map the spaces and bodies of Black and Indigenous peoples. Sf- horror is a genre which is widely consumed, and scholarly work within Black and Indigenous Studies has made visible the ways the genre has the ability to both critique and proliferate colonial hierarchies. In addition to securing white settler agency, the colonial mapping which occurs in many creature feature texts is not sufficiently questioned and subsequently presented as universal, moves which serves to contain and conceal other modes of thinking place, ontology, and relationality.

The logics of colonial mapping projects not only generate and police the boundaries of the state, they also delimit the conditions of possibility for our bodies and identities. As Sharlene Mollett writes, colonial projects of dispossession ‘...are simultaneously about human relations with land and territories, sadly imagined by states and elites through racialised, gendered and carnal ideologies’ (5). Thus, colonial systems of mapping serve to construct and constrain the discursive, representational, geographic, and ontological boundaries of Black and Indigenous people. If writers, filmmakers, scholars, and fans are to productively expose and work against these systems of constraint, ‘It is critical ... that we question expectations and explore their origins, for they created – and they continue to reproduce – social, political, legal and economic relations that are asymmetrical, sometimes grossly so’ (Deloria 4).

Prophecy reproduces a geo-spatial racial hierarchy in which Black and Indigenous people have been excluded from normative understandings of space because logics of racialization and

conquest have rendered these ways of producing and relating to space as illegible, degenerate, and inhuman. An analysis which traces out the impacts of colonial and anti-Black mapping process reveals that the archetype of the rural as uncivilized persists because these places have been rendered permanently underdeveloped and unlivable is through their geographic association with racially inferior communities, which is what enables the analogy with lower class whites who live rural areas to function. Deconstructing these settler cartographies of people and place can serve to denaturalize our understandings of place and the human, making visible the conventions which enable colonial mapping processes of space and the body to operate undisturbed.

Notes

1. Opies is a portmanteau of the words ‘Original Peoples.’ There is a significant amount of re-naming and appropriation of names in the film. Masaquoddy, the name of the tribe and the reservation where *Prophecy* takes place is, I suspect, an intentional misspelling and renaming of the actual tribal peoples known as the Passamaquoddy. The Passamaquoddy and Penobscot Indians inhabit territories in Maine, and their treaty rights to their lands were ratified in the Treaty between the Passamaquoddy Tribe & The Commonwealth of Massachusetts 1794. Katahdin, too, is a problematic renaming of an Indigenous hero-figure and landmark. For a version of the Katahdin oral narrative, see Molly Spotted Elk’s *Katahdin: Wigwam’s Tales of the Abnaki Tribe*.

2. The final page of the *Prophecy* novelization states, ‘It has been widely reported in journals throughout Canada that lumber mills there, have for several years been using methylmercury...and spilling it into the inland watersheds’ (Seltzer 246).

3. See Christopher Vecsey, ‘Grassy Narrows Reserve: Mercury Pollution, Social Disruption, and Natural Resources: A Question of Autonomy.’

4. See Patrick Wolfe’s ‘Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native.’

5. For examples of scholarship which explores the ways settler-colonialism, gender, and the representation of Indigenous peoples and land are entangled, see Simpson, ‘The state is a man: Theresa Spence, Loretta Saunders and the gender of settler sovereignty;’ Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The Politics and Poetics of an Ethnographic Event*; Hearne, *Native Recognition: Indigenous Cinema and the Western*; and Piatote, *Domestic Subjects: Gender, Citizenship and Law in Native American Literature*.

6. Similar policies can be seen across settler states such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. For a comparative analysis, see ‘Indigenous Children’s Rights: A Sociological Perspective on Boarding Schools and Transracial Adoption’ by Engels et al.

7. See Saidiya Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*.

8. See Frank Wilderson III’s discussion of ‘the ruse of analogy’ in *Red, White, and Black* (35-53). While I differ from Wilderson in that I argue that Indigenous and Black spaces are both rendered outside the human, I want to emphasize that these similar positionings are produced through very different grammars of representation, a distinction which I think is key in my discussion of the ways white supremacist worldviews construct Indigeneity and Blackness as antagonistic to one another.

9. For an elaborated critique of the politics of recognition, see Glen Sean Coulthard’s *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*.

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