

FOUNDING VIOLENCE IN THE FUTURE: A MNEMONIC READING OF RIDLEY SCOTT'S *ALIEN*

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- 188** I believe that the representation of alien existence, that is to say, of the imagination of radical otherness, can be seen to have passed through several distinct stages on its way to the contemporary period (where the alien and the other has once again reverted to magic and to dragons).

—Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future* (140)

In this article, I offer a settler colonial reading of Sir Ridley Scott's *Alien* films: *Alien* (1979), *Prometheus* (2012), and *Alien: Covenant* (2017). My purpose is to underscore the historical dimensions within *Alien*'s depiction of the future and to demonstrate that the film series is far more exercised with historicity than with futurity. Specifically, I argue that Scott's metaphors, themes, and plots were intentionally evocative of the horrors of British imperial expansion within North America and function as a kind of mnemonic device that remember the violence of the settler colonial past. More broadly, I offer this analysis because, like many other scholars, I view the science fiction and horror genres, between which we can locate *Alien*, as remarkably provocative and productive. Such non-realist depictions of monsters, zombies, ghosts, alien invasions, or the human colonization of outer space contain archives of historical feeling that can be accessed through what Chickasaw scholar Jodi Byrd called a "mnemonic reading" praxis. In *The Transit of Empire*, Byrd explains that a mnemonic reading seeks to "connect the violences and genocides of colonization to cultural productions [...] in order to disrupt the elisions of multicultural liberal democracy that seek to rationalize the originary historical traumas that birthed settler colonialism through inclusion" (xii-xiii). In reading Scott's film series mnemonically as a larger story invested with settler colonial genocide and preoccupied with foreclosures of human futurity, I add to a considerable body of scholarly literature on *Alien* that has

shaped my reading of the series as well as my approach to the horror and science fiction genres as cathected with coloniality.

For readers unfamiliar with *Alien*, it will suffice to describe it here as a popular series of films, graphic novels, comic books, video games, and other cultural productions that stage violent and horrific conflicts between human beings and a particular species of “Alien” that wreaks havoc upon the crews of spaceships attempting to explore, settle, or mine a futuristic galactic frontier. The titular “Alien,” whose fully-developed form is called the Xenomorph, is monstrous and has acidic blood. It also has a second set of jaws that protrude from a tongue-like appendage extending from the monster’s mouth, though this is not its most grotesque or defining feature. The Xenomorph is able to use human bodies for its own sexual reproduction cycle and attacks its hosts with a gestational implant that later bursts from the chest of the victim in what has become a signature body horror sequence in any *Alien* cultural production. In addition to the fact that *Alien* films have women as protagonists, this recurring body horror motif wherein human beings are fatally impregnated by the Xenomorph has made the series particularly interesting to feminist scholars, who (at least in my view) have generated the most productive conversations on the franchise since the first film debuted in 1979 (Bell-Mettreau; Creed; Jeffords; Rushing; Torry; Vaughn). In many such readings, *Alien* is a science fiction and horror fusion that contained several complex themes associated with motherhood as well as many gendered horror movie tropes, such as “the final girl,” which Carol J. Cleaver theorized in *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* as the heroine who survives the violent ordeal and is able to kill the villain of a horror film; some examples include Jamie Lee Curtis’s character in *Halloween* or Betsy Palmer’s character in *Friday the 13th*. In my reading, *Alien*’s body horror and staging of reproductive violence on the galactic frontier remains remarkably gendered; however, I read *Alien* mnemonically to demonstrate that this gendered dimension intersects with what is, after all, a fundamentally colonial metaphor wherein the futuristic galactic frontier is haunted by the horror of what was done to Indigenous peoples by European settlers in general and British imperialists more specifically. In my conclusion, I connect this settler colonial reading of horror and science fiction cinema to postcolonial theories of literary magical realism by positioning them both as colonial discourses whose alterations to reality and normalcy constitute cultural confrontations with the horrors and trauma of the past.

What prompted my analysis here was Scott’s decision to create a prequel series to his original 1979 film. In 2012, *Prometheus* was released, and was then followed up five years later by *Alien: Covenant*, both of which offered a backstory to the original 1979 film. Though every fan of the series seems to have a different view on what constitutes the official *Alien* canon, it is necessary to note here that other films in the series, such as *Aliens* (1986), *Alien 3* (1992), and *Alien: Resurrection* (1997), were not directed by Scott, nor were they widely praised in the critical or scholarly sense. Thus, my analysis in this article is limited to the *Alien* films that were directed by

Scott, which makes my task considerably more manageable. In addition to updating the scholarly literature by addressing the most recent *Alien* films, this ‘task’ will also be to demonstrate the value of reading the horror and science fiction genres, even in their Hollywood iterations, as constitutive of colonial discourse in the full and proper sense. To be clear, I am arguing here and in what follows that horror and science fiction films can help us to understand how colonialism works in the same way that an archival document or piece of literary fiction can reveal or disclose the operation of colonial power within identity formations, understandings of history, and enmeshments of race, gender, land, and labour. Though I expect readers of this journal will welcome rather than resist this critical gesture that affirms cinema as a scholarly subject of colonial analysis, I will not take anything for granted and will seek to provide sufficient evidence and argument within and beyond the *Alien* series to make a convincing case for what is, after all, a considerable claim. To that end, I begin with some definitional work prior to offering a more detailed review of the

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DEFINITIONAL DIMENSIONS

Settler colonialism as a distinct variety of colonialism is central to my analysis as well as to Byrd’s original articulation of “reading mnemonically.” Whereas a classical colonial project is focused less on settlement and more on capitalizing on the surplus value of Indigenous labour, land, and resources—as, for instance, in the French fur trade—settler colonial projects are structured on what political philosopher Patrick Wolfe termed “a logic of elimination” wherein settlers seek to replace Indigenous peoples on their own land:

The logic of elimination not only refers to the summary liquidation of Indigenous people, though it includes that. In common with genocide as Raphael Lemkin characterized it, settler colonialism has both negative and positive dimensions. Negatively, it strives for the dissolution of native societies. Positively, it erects a new colonial society on the expropriated land base [...] settler colonizers come to stay: invasion is a structure not an event. (388)

In a settler colonial situation, then, Indigenous peoples are targeted with genocidal policies that seek to destroy them through a spectrum of eliminatory mechanisms that can include biological as well as assimilative and legislative forms of elimination. A settler colonial situation, as in Canada, the United States, Australia, or Aotearoa/New Zealand, is to be understood as structurally distinct from a postcolonial condition, wherein the maintenance of racist power relations survives a national liberation movement or the superficial decolonization of given locale, as in Chile after 1810, Bolivia after 1825, India after 1947, or Sierra Leone after 1961. This is not to hierarchize victimhood in any sense, as colonial rule is brutal and horrific in any variation. Nonetheless, these structural distinctions between classical, post-, and settler colo-

nialism are relevant to this analysis in that they relate to differential configurations of race, sovereignty, state power, and identity formation as well as their manifestation in cultural productions.

In addition to its “logic of elimination,” there are several other definitional dimensions of settler colonialism that distinguish it analytically from other varieties of colonialism; for example, whereas colonialism refers to the linear and hierarchical relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, settler colonial economies are normatively dependent on the importation of coercive and carceral forms of labour performed by racialized bodies and peoples of colour who are not Indigenous to the land in question; examples include slavery in the Antebellum American south or Chinese railway labour in late nineteenth-century western Canada. This produces what scholars have called a triadic relationship between white settlers, Indigenous peoples, and migrant labourers (Tuck and Yang). Indeed, settler colonial histories in which non-white peoples are violently brought to Indigenous lands are themselves productive of their own literary and cinematic traditions. Jacques Tourneur’s *I Walked With A Zombie* (1943), George A. Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), and the more recent critical and commercial success of filmmaker Jordan Peele with *Get Out* (2017), *Us* (2019), and *Nope* (2022) provide historical and contemporary examples of how horror and science fiction films can speak powerfully to histories and legacies of Black-white race relations, thus lending themselves to a mnemonic reading that focuses on the historical dimensions of slavery and diaspora as the chief metaphor of each film. Nonetheless, in order to make this analysis more manageable, I will focus exclusively in my mnemonic reading on white settler colonial subjects’ violent and genocidal orientation towards Indigenous peoples as reflected within the metaphorical economy of Scott’s *Alien* universe. This is important to underscore because it is not the only or necessarily the best way to approach the franchise; rather, it is a function of my positionality as a white settler historian who specializes in the genocidal histories of Canadian federal Indian policy. For example, in the original 1979 film, the titular *Alien* was played by 6-foot-10-inch Nigerian visual artist Bolaji Badejo, whose body was seen as producing a preferred visual effect; what is more, African-American actor Yaphet Kotto’s depiction of the character Parker (a Chief Engineer) in this same film also affords an opportunity to talk about the role of Blackness within the *Alien* universe; however, I will leave this to other scholars and focus in my analysis on metaphors of “founding violence” that relate Indigenous subjects to white settler subjects.

The concept of “founding violence,” as advanced by Veracini (“Settler Collective”), refers explicitly to those forms of historical violence that sought to clear the land of Indigenous peoples to make way for settler colonial projects. Veracini theorizes that “settler collectives are traumatised societies par excellence” (“Settler Collective” 364) whose violent histories of genocide are psychically disavowed through various forms of media production. For example, disavowal can happen through the celebratory depiction of founding violence, such as in Western films that portray Indigenous

peoples “circling the wagons” and threatening to prevent the origins of white settlement, thus rendering the murder of Indigenous peoples onscreen as a justified and heroic defensive gesture rather than an act of territorial aggression. Alternatively, ahistorical depictions of the settler colonial frontier in which Indigenous peoples are erased, obscured, or otherwise made invisible can also disavow founding violence through fantasies of peaceful settlement that Veracini describes as the “*Little House on the Prairie* style” (“Settler Collective” 363). The disavowal of founding violence is neither seamless nor complete, as anxious assertions of a peaceful past, in Veracini’s view, cannot fully subdue the psychic tensions associated with settler colonial social relations: “disavowal of all founding violence [...] cannot allay anxiety. Notwithstanding obsessively repeated representations of ‘quiet country’ and ‘peaceful settlement’, the settler fears revenge” (“Settler Collective” 368). Thus, while settler colonial societies produce fanciful narratives of immaculate national origins, so too are they psychologically prone to sudden reminders that induce anxiety by provoking repressed knowledges of the horrors of founding violence, as well as fears associated with the prospect of retributive violence for their occupation and plundering of Indigenous lands. Speaking in the specific context of American settler colonial histories and literary traditions, Renée Bergland writes in *The National Uncanny* that “the potencies of both the wish and the counter-wish,—here the desire to continue colonizing Native people and the desire to escape from colonialist regimes—create an obsessional mindset, in which American subjects continually return to the Native American figures who haunt them” (16). To read mnemonically, then, is to interpret the cinematic gore, blood, carnage, and conflict that is given visual life in science fiction and horror films as coded memories of frontier violence that were foundational to the emergence of settler colonial societies as structural historical formations. There is, of course, a conceptual limit on the relevance of reading mnemonically, particularly when science fiction and horror films are made by filmmakers who are not situated in a settler colonial locale and seek to comment on specific histories of nation, community, or identity; nonetheless, the ubiquity of founding violence in popular science fiction and horror films attests to the relevance and critical purchase of this interpretative praxis.

Reading mnemonically is remarkably productive within the horror and science fiction genres, which (to repeat) the *Alien* franchise fuses. The horror genre, for example, can be read mnemonically, particularly in the context of the ubiquity of the “Indian Burial Ground.” In *The Amityville Horror* (1979), for example, a series of horrific and violent events follows from the building of a white, middle-class suburban locale on the land of the Shinnecock Indian Nation. In *The Shining* (1980), Stanley Kubrick’s dialogue explicitly mentions Indian burial grounds, whereas frontier imagery was used to inflect the visuals of the film’s violence with signifiers of settlement, such as the hewing of wood in the famous “Here’s Johnny!” scene. A similar visual style is employed in *Children of the Corn* (1984) in that the tools and products of settler agriculture become representative of both symbolic and literal

violence. The film *Pet Semetary* (1989) was also an acute manifestation of colonial anxieties in its use of the trope of the Indian Burial Ground and its references to ongoing land disputes between American states and Wabanaki nations. By haunting their audiences with repressed signifiers of their settler colonial subject location, such films are able to achieve through symbolism what otherwise remains difficult to achieve through more direct intervention and realist forms of historical discourse: mainly, the provocation of a widespread acknowledgement amongst white western peoples that we live on Indigenous lands and that genocidal forms of violence were embedded in the constitution of the present historical moment. The horror of who we are, in a historical sense, comes back to haunt settlers on the Hollywood screen. Indeed, the cinematic universe conjured up in many Hollywood horror films is regularly calibrated to play upon the anxieties of a western audience that has a repressed knowledge of its own occupation of Indigenous lands. For example, the monstrous violence wrought by Jason Voorhees in *Friday the 13th* (1978) and Freddy Krueger in *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984)—two films containing the “final girl” trope—was retributive in nature and sought to punish an older generation’s children for the violence of their ancestors. In these and many other horror films, idyllic white suburban locales are revealed to sit atop horrific amounts of founding violence that will not stay put in the historical past. As Warren Cariou explains:

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[T]he driving psychological force behind these Aboriginal hauntings as they are imagined by non-Native writers, then, is as in most ghost stories the return of the repressed, [which] reflects a widespread and perhaps growing anxiety suffered by settlers [that...] can be described in Freudian terms as a kind of neocolonial uncanny, a lurking sense that the places settlers call home are not really theirs. (727)

Horror films produced by western filmmakers are, to a certain extent, cultural productions that grapple through symbolism and metaphor with the repressed psychic anxieties of settler colonial subjects and their disavowals of founding violence.

Science fiction films can also be read mnemonically as forming part of a larger colonialist discourse. The work of French filmmaker Georges Méliès seems somewhat foundational in this context, as his *Le Voyage dans la Lune* (1902) is widely noted to have committed a colonial equivocation that is common to the genre as a whole: mainly, the representation of ‘Aliens’ as antagonistic and Indigenous inhabitants of the galactic frontier that threaten to prevent the human colonization of outer space. In this particular example, then, Méliès’s representation of the colonization of the moon reflected the history of French imperialist expansion. As Ella Shohat and Robert Stam noted, Méliès’s film, which was premised on Jules Verne’s 1865 novel, “is structured like a colonial captivity narrative: spear-carrying skeleton creatures burst from the moon’s simulacral jungle and capture the explorers, only to be defeated by the male explorer’s gunlike umbrellas, which magically eliminate the savage creatures. Such a film, not in any obvious sense ‘about’ colonialism, can thus be read as analogizing imperial expansion” (110). More broadly, the fear that alien civilizations will embody the same predatory impulse as European settler colonial

projects is an anxiety embedded in H.G. Wells's *War of the Worlds* (1898). Wells was able to locate the nucleus of *War of the Worlds* in a specific conversation he had had with his brother regarding the British imperial project in Tasmania, which prompted the thought experiment of what a colonization of England might look like if it were undertaken by an Alien race bearing technologies unknown to the English (Ball). The 1938 radio program and 1953 and 2005 films based on *War of the Worlds* are particular examples of a more general trend in the science fiction genre, in which colonial subjects think of galactic space as a conceptual frontier wherein we grapple with the implications of who we are, what we have done, and what this might mean within the imagined futures of our species as humans. It was for this reason precisely that Jameson described *War of the Worlds* as "patently a guilt fantasy in the part of Victorian man who wonders whether the brutality with which he has used the colonial peoples (the extinction of the Tasmanians) may not be visited on him by some more advanced race intent, in its turn, on his destruction" (265). As we shall see, this thought-experiment on coloniality is profoundly present in Scott's *Alien* films, and doubly so in the context of the two later additions to the series.

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In addition to its arguably foundational preoccupation with coloniality, the science fiction genre developed historically to have a rather consistent and continuous fascination with grand galactic narratives wherein imperial politics shape the terrains of the human future. The *Star Wars* franchise, of course, looms large in this context, as Luke Skywalker and a ragtag group of rugged Rebel Alliance heroes band together to wage a noble war of resistance against the imperial encroachment of the evil Empire. Skywalker is aided in this adventure by the space cowboy Han Solo, a roguish man who daringly traverses the galaxy, frequents bars, and has shootouts with bounty hunters. As David Higgins noted, this "remarkable fetish for heroic decolonization narratives" (51) is also reflected in *The Matrix* tetralogy, the *Hunger Games* trilogy, and several other popular science fiction films whose narrative universe is centred around noble acts of resistance that seek to prevent imperial expansion. Indeed, the "final frontier," to quote *Star Trek*, is very often a transplanting of the western colonial frontier into a galactic setting. For many of these reasons and more, Veracini has sought to "drawn attention to what [they] believe is the intimate relationship between a specifically settler colonial form of consciousness and science fiction" ("Review" 268). As a science fiction film, then, *Alien* reflects this tension and anxiety about the colonization of outer-space that is central to the genre's history and intrigue.

With these concepts of settler colonialism, founding violence, and mnemonic readings of the science fiction and horror genres now established, we will now turn more directly towards the *Alien* franchise.

THE *ALIEN* FRANCHISE: THE STORY

The original script for *Alien*, written by the late Dan O'Bannon, begins with a galactic

mining crew's journey home upon a spacecraft. Interestingly, the author suggested in the "Cast of Characters" section of the script that "the crew is unisex and all parts are interchangeable for men or women." Nonetheless, all of the characters are written as male and referred to as men throughout the script. In the script's opening pages, the crew intercepts a mysterious non-human transmission from a nearby planet. Seduced by the prospect of making "first contact" with intelligent life, the crew decides to land and investigate the uncharted planet. After discovering a ruined spaceship, the team enters an ancient pyramid structure, wherein they encounter what the script refers to as "centuries-old spores, which are triggered into life by the men's presence." One of these spores releases a small insect-like creature that latches onto a crewmember's face. With the alien still attached to his face, the ill-fated crewmember is brought back to the ship and examined. To the horror of the crew, it is discovered that the parasite has impregnated the man with some sort of gestating alien lifeform, which eventually emerges from the victim's body and wreaks havoc aboard the ship. The Alien grows quickly and tears the crew apart, with successive members dying increasingly grisly and gruesome deaths. Ultimately, there is only one survivor of the crew who succeeds in destroying the Alien and fleeing in an escape pod; however, the closing of the script notes that a "pod spore is adhered to the underbelly of the ship," thereby implying that the Alien has succeeded in using the technology and bodies of humans as a vector for its own sexual reproduction. Thus, the original script recruited a mining spacecraft as a colonial metaphor in a galactic restaging of a first-contact narrative. Further, in using the biological reproductive cycle of the titular Alien as a very visual and sexual reference point, O'Bannon's script set the stage, so to speak, for an interesting science-fiction and horror fusion that was generative of new tensions and anxieties within the genre. As O'Bannon said: "One thing that people are all disturbed about is sex [...] I said 'That's how I'm going to attack the audience; I'm going to attack them sexually. And I'm not going to go after the women in the audience, I'm going to attack the men. I am going to put in every image I can think of to make the men in the audience cross their legs'" (qtd. in Cranny-Francis 236). Thus, laden in the script itself was an essentially colonial metaphor as well as a somewhat Freudian ploy to provoke psychosexual discomfort in a male audience.

Though the film *Alien* followed the script's plotline very closely, there were some notable revisions that likely influenced its commercial and critical success. First and foremost, the film's protagonist and sole human survivor was the heroine Ellen Ripley, played by Sigourney Weaver in a highly celebrated performance. Second, the film included a plotline in which an evil corporation had sent an android, disguised convincingly as a human, to secure the eponymous Alien and capture it as a biosample, even if this required the deception and death of all the other crewmembers. This particular inclusion doubled down on the colonial metaphor of the original script by adding into the story the corrupting influence of exploratory capitalism as well as the coded racial drama of a mining company seeking to capture Indigenous inhabitants of the frontier so as to study and thereby gain power through the growth of galactic

knowledge. The third revision worth noting is minor in scope but significant in light of my analysis here, which is Ridley Scott's curious addition of literary references to the work of Joseph Conrad. For example, in the original script, the spacecraft on which the crew is travelling is named "SNARK," presumably an acronym of "space navigation" combined with a biblical reference to an ark; however, in the film, the spaceship is named "Nostromo," which is the title of a Conrad novel set in a fictional South American colonial locale; fittingly, the site of mining operations. Thus, Ridley Scott's execution of O'Bannon's script magnified the references to colonial historicity and more meaningfully cast in a critical light the contaminating influences of corporations, capitalism, and resource extraction. Another contribution to this visual and critical style of *Alien* was that the future it depicted was hardly impressive, brightly lit, or replete with shining metal, silver bodysuits, and other imagery to suggest technological rupture from the world we now occupy. Rather, the world in which *Alien* took place was grimy, dirty, and bleak. Though it was not necessarily dystopic nor apocalyptic, *Alien* depicted a world in which human happiness was very much stifled by the operation of corporate greed and deception, which the series often symbolized through the treachery of android characters who acted as vectors of corporate will.

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Responses to the 1979 film were certainly mixed; however, it is clear that the film energized a generation of scholars and critics for whom *Alien* was the chance to initiate conversations on the fraught nature of coloniality, gender, and identity as they were staged on Hollywood's galactic frontier. While much of this scholarship was first-rate, one particular contribution informs my analysis here more than any other: Janice Hocker Rushing's reading of the film as a colonialist narrative of "frontier exploration" wherein "the lost feminine is encountered, found to be vengeful at the exploitation of her domain, and then killed by a patriarchalized heroine" (10). Important to Rushing's analysis was the overtly sexual nature of *Alien's* imagery and how it signified the realization or encounter with the symbolic feminine as well as a vengeful Indigenous inhabitant of outer space. Although her analysis is grounded in a feminist and Freudian rereading of *Alien* as opposed to a critique of settler colonial logics of elimination, the particular critical move I want to retrace here is how she articulates the original *Alien* film as a galactic captivity narrative that mapped the symbolic meanings of the western frontier onto the temporal and spatial alterities of galactic space. In this frame, the encounter between Ripley—a white woman—and the Alien takes on both gendered and colonial overtones that correspond to sexual tensions and anxieties produced by the proximity of differently speciated bodies that come into contact on a new frontier. Indeed, what fans of the franchise have termed the "face-hugger" and "chest-burster"—different gestational stages of the Alien that are extremely vaginal and phallic in their respective appearances—are enduring images of the series and are also well theorized in Rushing's rereading of the film's sexually evocative imagery. This sexual imagery is especially provocative in my analysis in that it constitutes a kind of colonizing the colonizer in the metaphorical economy of science fictional space exploration.

Similar sexually explicit imagery informed the later installments of the *Alien* series, though these sequels were hardly constitutive of the cultural event that was animated by the original. For example, as Tim Blackmore noted, “if the critical world’s reaction to Ridley Scott’s 1979 *Alien* was mixed, the academic condemnation of James Cameron’s 1986 sequel, *Aliens*, has been uniform” (211). For brevity’s sake, I leave these films largely unaddressed here except to underscore Blackmore’s critique of *Aliens*, which centred upon the film’s reproduction of the “noble grunts” trope, which recasts military conflicts as heroic stories centred on the survival of a given cast of characters (213). To be fair, Blackmore’s critique was much more complex than a mere equation of *Aliens* to a Vietnam film set in space. At the same time, this reduction of his wider argument is a convenient one in that it exemplifies how scholars have continued to critique the *Alien* franchise as containing extremely earthly investments despite its apparent occupation with outer space. In my own view, the *Alien* films not directed by Scott were, to a considerable degree, uncritical reproductions of imperialist and militaristic violence, in the same spirit as Robert Heinlein’s *Starship Troopers*.

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PROMETHEUS (2012) AND ALIEN: COVENANT (2017)

The news that Ridley Scott had stepped back into a lead directing role for *Prometheus* was therefore very welcome to many fans of the series—or, more precisely, fans of the original 1979 film who, like myself, had followed *Alien* in other formats such as graphic novels and comics. Scott, who is also beloved by science fiction fans for his *Blade Runner* (1982), announced his plans for an *Alien* prequel at the San Diego ComicCon in the summer of 2011 and revealed small clips of footage from the cutting room floor to tantalize his audience. Scott also directly signalled that the film would confront thematic issues of colonialism as well as a more nuanced, or at any rate, introspective interrogation of primitivity and human origins: “Space exploration in the future is going to evolve into this idea that it’s not just about going out there and finding planets to build colonies,” Scott explained; “it also has this inherent idea that the further we go out, the more we learn about ourselves. The characters in this movie are preoccupied by the idea: what are our origins?” (qtd. in Child). In this regard, the film did not disappoint.

Fittingly, in the opening scene of *Prometheus*, a blue-skinned but very humanoid extraterrestrial figure ingests a strange liquid that then dissolves their body into a flowing waterfall. In the draft script for the film, this character is named “The Elder”; they are described as genderless, and they recite a small prayer that did not make it into the actual film: “let your body become the dirt. Let your blood become the waters. And may your soul become their way back to us” (Biltoo). As the audience later learns, these particular alien lifeforms, known as the Engineers, were responsible for seeding the Earth with humans, whose DNA is a close approximation of their own.

The Engineers even went so far as to leave small maps in Earth's caves so that humanity might find them when attaining civilizational maturity. However, the Engineers soon noted the evil tendencies in humanity, grew disappointed in us as their creation, and decided that the best course of action was to destroy us. The Engineers aimed to employ a biochemical weapon to eliminate humanity that was being prepared on a moon in a nearby system (LV-223); however, this biochemical agent, what fans call "the black goo," overtook the Engineers on LV-223 and destroyed them before they could carry out their mission of eradicating humans from the galaxy.

The story of *Prometheus* is the story of a human crew aboard the eponymous spaceship. The crew of the *Prometheus* contains a research team that has painstakingly assembled the location of LV-223 through archaeological investigations of ancient star maps located across the Earth. But when the crew finally arrives to meet the Engineers, they discover to their horror that their creators have long since been killed by the mysterious biological agent. A familiar storyline for the *Alien* series then plays itself out: members of the crew are infected by and then terrorized by an Alien menace that uses their bodies in a form of gestational reproduction; an android named David sent by an evil corporation—and played expertly by Michael Fassbender—betrays the crew in an attempt to get a live sample of the Alien, which resembles an earlier and perhaps less-evolved version of the Xenomorph from the 1979 film. Elizabeth Shaw, the white female protagonist of the film, played by Noomi Rapace, barely survives a gripping battle with the Alien. Shaw uses her aptitude with machinery to defeat her enemy, win the day, and escape with her life as "the final girl." In a horrific and disturbing sequence, Shaw undergoes an operation in which a robot surgeon removes a gestating Alien from her abdominal cavity in what can only be described as a kind of abortive procedure. At the film's end, the protagonist and the android, David, are the sole survivors of the ordeal. The pair decides to travel the galaxy together in search of the Engineers in an effort to understand what happened on LV-223 and why humanity had originally been targeted for elimination. Though the tone of the film's ending is somewhat hopeful, the larger Promethean metaphor embedded in the plot is such that destruction was awaiting the human race the moment that they had developed the capacity to understand and encounter their own origins. As one character in the 2021 comic *Alien: Bloodlines* put it: "When organic species grow arrogant enough to travel the stars...they find it waiting...the fire that keeps the universe clean...of parasites like you" (Johnson 91). One cannot help but recalling here that this arguably anti-modern aversion to technology within *Prometheus* connects it to Mary Shelley's masterpiece *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* (1818).

Scott's next installment, *Alien: Covenant* (2017), came full circle and connected the original Conradian themes of the 1979 film to the new prequel series. Chronologically, the film was set eleven years after the events of *Prometheus* and before the events of *Alien*. In the film, we encounter the crew of the titular *Covenant*, which is a colonization vessel that is carrying thousands of settlers and human embryos to a desirable and hospitable planet. While on their journey, the crew

encounters what appears to resemble a human transmission from a nearby planet that is also hospitable for human habitation. When they land, the crew finds that the planet is a veritable graveyard littered with the bodies of the Engineers, who have clearly died a torturous and violent death en masse. Upon investigating further, the crew of the *Covenant* encounters David, the android from the *Prometheus*, whose travel companion Elizabeth Shaw has since mysteriously died. Throughout the arc of the film's plot, we learn that the treacherous David successfully transported the biochemical agent he discovered on LV-223 and brought it with him across the galaxy. Using Elizabeth Shaw's body to conduct horrific experiments with the "black goo," David carefully engineered the titular Alien into a terrifying killing machine that evolved into the villain from the original 1979 film. In a keynote flashback sequence depicting the elimination of the Engineers, David—speaking with an English accent, quoting poetry from Percy Bysshe Shelley, and standing on the deck of a galactic spaceship—releases an onslaught of the biochemical weapon that chokes, murders, and destroys the entire planet of the Engineers. In a far-from-hopeful ending, David succeeds in outsmarting the crew of the ship and uses their vessel to transport his engineered Alien embryos to the *Covenant's* original destination. The successful human colonization of the universe is thus undone and, from this point in the series moving forward, all that awaits humans in the galactic frontier is the same horrific and scientifically engineered Alien that audiences first encountered in the original 1979 film.

READING *ALIEN* MNEMONICALLY

Like the original *Alien*, both *Prometheus* and *Alien: Covenant* offered colonial narratives of the galactic frontier in which Aliens are staged as symbolic Indigenous occupants of outer space whose relations with human characters act as a mnemonic device for genocide and founding violence. However, in the original film, the eponymous 'Alien' was a monstrous and largely instinctual figure who acted vengefully and violently at the exploitation of its—or, in Rushing's frame, *her*—territory. The monster did not speak, nor did it seek to communicate. The 'Alien's' insect-like body was not humanoid and its sexual reproduction cycle was an uncanny restaging of our own that necessitated the death of the human host in order to give life to the Xenomorph. The acidic blood of the 'Alien' was a fitting metaphor to show how the very lifeblood of the Xenomorph is deadly to humans. Speaking specifically about this 1979 film, Jameson argued that "one of the unique formal features of the film is that we never see the alien completely at any stage of its growth and development, and thus in a way can never really know it [...] indeed it is also represented as having no language" (140). The Engineers, on the other hand, represent something very different altogether. Depicted as resolutely masculine and communicative, the Engineers have large, muscled humanoid bodies and speak a proto-Indo-European language.

As we learn in *Prometheus*, the Engineers created humanity. The opening sequence of the film, which shows an Engineer destroying their own body to seed humanity, is the metaphorical inversion of what the Xenomorph does to humans. Their blood is hardly acidic and death-dealing; in fact, human DNA is not far from Engineer DNA. Our fates are also quite similar: in much the same way that humanity's invention of artificial intelligence threw its futurity into question through the treachery of the android David, so too has the Engineers' creation of humanity contributed to their own horrific downfall and tragic destruction. As Eli Sorenson noted, "within a biopolitical perspective, *Alien* can be read as a film about the fantasy of the destruction of human life" (68). Though this is true of both the 1979 film and the 2012 and 2017 installments, how this destruction of humans takes place is different across the prequels and the original. In short, the original 'Alien' was a savage and barbaric figure of monstrous alterity that humanity encountered in the future, whereas the Engineers were noble savages and fey Romantic figures whose tragic fate ultimately gave rise to the emergence of human civilization. Scott's balancing of the Xenomorph with a symmetrically different counterpart in the Engineers is the most obvious revision to the colonial economy in the *Alien* universe. It was also a narrative choice that rendered the monster from the 1979 film as a more knowable entity whose alterity is compromised as we learn the evolutionary history of the Xenomorph from its developmental stages and journey from planet to planet. This addition foundationally changes *Alien*'s metaphorical structure in that the evil, inexplicable, and monstrous villain of the 1979 film became a knowable entity within the narrative universe, as we learn that the Xenomorph is not, in this framing, an Indigenous occupant of the galactic frontier; rather, it is a literal product of the unbounded and ungrounded technological ambition and corporate expansion of humanity. In a word increasingly run by corporations who harness technological ingenuity so as to further extract wealth from fellow humans and use it to travel into space, as the cases of Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos demonstrate, we can appreciate how Scott's prequels succeed once more in critiquing the corporation as a literal bane of human existence and a threat to our futurity as a species. It is also worth adding here that the depiction of the Xenomorph as a carefully cultivated creature whose bioevolutionary schema was the result of experimentation infuses the prequels with a Frankensteinian undertone that was not present in *Alien*.

When the android David eradicates an entire planet of Engineers with a biochemical weapon that is released from his ship in *Alien: Covenant*, it is hard, particularly as a Canadian historian, not to read the scene mnemonically as a coded memory of British frontier violence. For example, in July of 1763, during the Siege of Fort Pitt, Commander-in-Chief of the British Army Jeffrey Amherst directed Colonel Henry Bouquet to engage in biological warfare against a supratribal alliance of Indigenous peoples who rose up and resisted British rule in Pontiac's Uprising: "You will do well to try and inoculate the Indians by means of blankets," advised Amherst, "as well as to try every other method that can serve to extirpate this inexorable race" (qtd. in

Paul 165). Though there are documented overextensions of the smallpox blankets narrative to cases in which it is likely apocryphal (Dempsey), the story looms large in popular understandings of history. This exchange also rests at a specific moment in history, when the French colonial project of New France gave way to the rise of British North America and, by extension, Canadian settler colonialism. I argue that Scott, an English filmmaker directing a Hollywood film, intentionally invested *Alien: Covenant* with visual references to forms of biochemical warfare waged against Indigenous peoples in North America. Those who remember the haunting sequence from *Alien: Covenant* will also note the visual consistencies between the torturous death of the Engineers and historical photographs depicting what smallpox can do to a human body. Thus, the real horror of Scott's depiction of the futuristic galactic frontier is that it will resemble what took place on the western frontier, which ensures that the past crimes of England will be, somewhat ironically, hoist upon the entire galaxy in a fashion that prevents the human colonization of outer space and fore-closes our futurity as a species.

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In this mnemonic reading of *Alien*, the logics of elimination with which English colonizers targeted Indigenous peoples in North America are to *Alien* what the British colonization of Tasmania was to H.G. Wells's *War of the Worlds*: that is, a provocation to consider the galactic consequences of settler colonial histories in which the invading force seeks to eradicate the Indigenous inhabitants of the lands targeted for occupation, settlement, mining, and colonial exploitation. In a very on-the-nose reproduction of what is arguably science fiction's earliest and most enduring theme, Scott applied a logic of elimination to humanity itself and imagined it through the visual and poetic registers of pre-Victorian England (1763-1837). In having David quote Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Ozymandias" (1818) as he initiates the biochemical genocide of the Engineers, Scott added to *Alien: Covenant* an overt and coeval literary reference to the husband of Mary Shelley, author of *Frankenstein* (1818). References to this period embedded in the films are hardly coincidental and imbue the *Alien* universe's fantasy of the future with a perverse and reverse logic of moving backwards rather than forwards through historical time. Though it is my position here that we ought to understand these metaphorical registers within the context of settler colonial genocide and logics of elimination, it can be stated without contradiction that *Alien* constitutes a postcolonial metaphor in that it expresses the anxiety that humans cannot reach nor can we even successfully imagine a world that is beyond the colonial. It is within this context that I turn to the question of the grotesque and monstrous reproductive politics of *Alien*'s body horror sequences.

The grotesque destruction of the human body in the *Alien* films is surely one of the trademarks of the series. Arguably, the implanting, incubating, and eruption of the Xenomorph from the chest or abdominal cavity of a human provides *Alien* with a perverse thrill and psychosexual undertone that reliably repulses and attracts audiences. This ambivalent appeal of *Alien* and the gory spectacles it contains is central to my mnemonic reading of Scott's series as invested with settler colonialism.

Specifically, the keynote gore of *Alien* is a consequence of a Xenomorph repurposing the body of a human for its own sexual reproduction cycle. Though the humans in *Alien* are meant to be colonizing space and settling other planets by virtue of their exploratory presence on the galactic frontier, they find their very bodies taken over by the Xenomorph and given over to the reproduction of the futurity of another species. Put simply, the Alien colonizes the colonizer—and often on the colonizer’s own ship or vessel, no less. This is true in the metaphorical sense, as the Xenomorph occupies a human body as a reproductive vessel; it also true in the literal sense that the murderous attack most often takes place aboard the colonizer’s space vessel. I interpret this as a latent colonial and sexual investment within the metaphorical structure of *Alien*, given that settler colonialism is manifestly exercised with the securing of settler futurity in colonial locales by and through the policing of gendered bodies and the imposition of logics of elimination.

202 As Diane Nelson writes, “like horror, colonialism is fascinated by blood: good blood that must be safeguarded in white women’s bodies, [and] bad blood that will lead to the degeneration of the race and the nation” (385). Pausing here to recall that the protagonist of *Prometheus* underwent an abortive procedure in which an ‘Alien’ was removed from her abdominal cavity, I will stress that British settler colonial projects were often predicated on policing the proximities between white and Indigenous populations so as to prevent and foreclose the sexual (re)production of populations who were neither fully Indigenous nor European (Mawani). This is in contrast to other colonial projects, such as the French fur trade, wherein marriages between Indigenous women and European men were key formations in the constitution of the colonial economy (Van Kirk). The displacement of Indigenous women by white women was accomplished by banning interracial marriages and by creating social taboos that supported the white settlement of British North America by constructing Indigenous women in disparaging and dehumanizing ways (Carter). Interestingly, as far back as 1989, Rushing noted that scholars could understand the Xenomorph in the metaphorical sense as “the lost feminine [who] is encountered [... and] found to be vengeful at the exploitation of her domain” (10). Of course, in the original film, the white female protagonist Ripley succeeds in murdering the monster, which is reproductive of the “final girl” trope identified by Cleaver; however, Ripley’s defeat of the ‘Alien’ is at the same time a symbolic ascension of white femininity over and against galactic alterity that can be interpreted within a settler colonial frame of reference, given that white women replaced Indigenous women within the precise pre-Victorian era under discussion here. What is more, in the story provided to us in *Prometheus* and *Alien: Covenant*, we see that white female protagonist Elizabeth Shaw’s body was successfully repurposed by the Android David as a vessel for the evolution of the Xenomorph. Prior to this point in the series, the Aliens we see in *Prometheus* and *Alien: Covenant* are terrifying but do not bear an identical resemblance to the monster of the original film; however, at the end of the 2017 film, David has gained access to the bodies of thousands of settlers who are kept asleep using intergalactic travel

technology. Presumably, then, David was able to use the long galactic travel to the Covenant's original destination to evolve the Xenomorph into its final and terrifying form: the one we encounter in the original film. Thus, whereas settler colonialism was successful in the 1979 film's depiction of Ripley's killing of the Alien, the opposite is true of the storyarc of both *Prometheus* and *Alien: Covenant* in that a white women's body became the ultimate vessel of the colony's destruction rather than the portal through which its futurity flowed. This perverse play on "the final girl" and inversion of its logic of survival/elimination is another way in the which the prequels revise or differ from the original.

I should also note before concluding here that this theoretical gesture of situating body horror and reproductive politics in a science fiction film within British settler colonial coordinates was done expertly in Veracini's critique of *District 9* (2009) and *Avatar* (2009), whose protagonists literally become aliens in the embodied sense. Thus, while my reading focuses on the violent impossibility of human and extra-terrestrial bodies experiencing hybridity in *Alien*, Veracini reflects on the fraught metaphor of Indigenizing the settler subject in science fiction more broadly; nonetheless, I find that our analyses are mutually supportive and both seek to show the settler colonial investments contained within popular science fiction films that stage white masculine bodies being taken over by an extraterrestrial lifeform. I would also add here that gendered and Freudian readings of *Alien* are probably incomplete to the extent that they do not take into account the colonial politics of gender on the galactic frontier, which is always already a metaphorical space haunted by the history of what has happened on Earth.

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CONCLUSION: ON POST-/SETTLER COLONIAL ANTINOMIES

When Homi K. Bhabha wrote in *Nation and Narration* that "'magical realism,' after the Latin American Boom, becomes the literary language of the post-colonial world" (7), I believe he was referring to how the operation of colonial power, so often obscured or erased from the official state-based narratives of national histories, was unveiled and given metaphorical life in the works of writers who used what Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier termed "unexpected alterations to reality" as well as an "amplification of the scale and categories of reality" (Arellano 105). Such nonrealist depictions of history served to simultaneously symbolize and critique the pain, trauma, and loss that resulted from Spanish, Portuguese, and other European colonial projects. Written from the subject position of colonized peoples, magically realist depictions of the past provoked postcolonial scholars who used such narratives as a chance to articulate very real experiences of racial violence, as in Carpentier's *The Kingdom of This World*. Indeed, this article would be woefully incomplete if it did not acknowledge in this context that Bhabha's *Location of Culture*—inarguably a keynote text

in the postcolonial canon—was a text that returned often to the author’s reading of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, which is, to put it somewhat reductively, a ghost story. To be clear, I am not arguing here for a parity between Morrison’s masterful text and Scott’s *Alien* series, nor do I believe that my reading of Scott’s film attains to the same theoretical complexities or historical truths as Bhabha’s unpacking of *Beloved*. Scott and I write from the subject position of (settler) colonial subjects, whereas Morrison and Bhabha do not. There is an experiential chasm here that makes our experiences and readings of history and culture to some degree incommensurable.

Nonetheless, my position here is that Hollywood science fiction and horror can be read mnemonically in the same spirit as postcolonial readings of magical realism, as each contain archives of colonial feeling as manifest in non-realist depictions of human experience. To risk making a pithy equation, if “magical realism is the literary language of the postcolonial world,” then horror and science fiction can be read as the historical consciousness of the settler colonial world. As a specific example, Scott’s *Alien* series demonstrates how Hollywood science fiction films grapple with the horror of history through metaphor, symbolism, carnage, and blood that continuously return to haunt settlers as repressed memories of the past encoded as fantasies of the future. Though it parades as a fantasy of the future, *Alien* remembers the colonial past, and its two most recent films were remarkably evocative of the rise of British North America. Of course, this much can be said of several science fiction films; however, the perverse denouement of *Alien*, wherein the human future is foreclosed and the colonization of space made impossible, makes the series uniquely provoking. Not only does this unhappy ending for humanity challenge audiences to engage with the profoundly gendered implications of founding violence in a galactic metaphor—something very likely intentional on Scott’s part—but it also reproduces the very totalized logics of British settler colonial expansion and its attendant anxieties associated with blood, birth, and futurity, something I believe may be latent in Scott’s imaginary. In any case, while we can hardly describe *Alien* as a series that engages in magical realism, it is possible to unpack how its narrative is haunted by coloniality, to read this haunting mnemonically, and to situate it properly in its British settler colonial configurations and logics of elimination. This is precisely why the non-realist elements of the series, such as the Xenomorph, the androids, or the “black goo,” are all instrumental agents in ensuring that humans will reproduce in space what we have done to one another on Earth: mainly, the destruction of one population and its biopolitical replacement by an invading alien body.

Though my mnemonic reading of *Alien* does not in its immediacy contribute to the postcolonial study of magical realism, settler colonial critiques of horror and science fiction speak to similar themes, structures of feeling, and fraught identity formations flagged by this body of literature to the extent that I believe, and I hope readers agree, that such scholarly conversations are best staged alongside one another. Mnemonic reading can also help to draw out the meaningful cultural differences that characterize post- and settler colonial cultural productions, which also

bear marked differences that often result from specific national histories and trajectories of competing European imperial powers. In other words, though Spanish conquest and British settler colonialism were each horrific, they were horrific in different ways, at different times, and towards different peoples, which can be detected in the critical reading of films and literary works that are embedded in these histories. This critical praxis of unpacking the post- and settler colonial politics of such cultural productions also does much more than allow scholars to spend time discussing provoking films and interesting works of literary fiction. Significantly, mnemonic reading can help us understand the incommensurability of our shared experiences and the unspeakable trauma of colonial histories through the gripping metaphors of the horrific, the unhomely, the ghostly, and the alien.

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