

***Indigenomicon* Chapter 1**

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Empire's Dead: Racial Capitalism, Indigeneity, and the Cultural Politics of Settlement

H. P. Lovecraft's compendium of Cthulhu mythos emerged at a fin-de-siècle moment over a century ago. Lovecraft was born in August the same year as the Wounded Knee massacre, and as a writer, he drew a macabre underworld of Great Old Ones into being that lurks somewhere beneath the Pacific Ocean on the lost continent of Mu, a nowhere landmass that maps over the Hawaiian Islands and recalls mimetically the mythical Terra Australis that spawned Captain Cook's eighteenth-century voyages of possession into the Pacific. Lovecraft's *Necronomicon*, a dream book verisimilitude that he invented to evoke the sinister condition of possibility that dusty grimoires collecting on shelves in old bookstores posed, was, according to his world-building, authored by the "Mad Arab" Abdul Alhazred. As a book within a book, the *Necronomicon* has had a half-life almost as extensive as Cthulhu itself and has been reincarnated in numerous forms including Sam Raimi's films *The Evil Dead*, *Evil Dead II* and *Army of Darkness* as the *Necronomicon Ex-Mortis*. Similarly, William Gibson's *Cryptonomicon* draws inspiration from Lovecraft's portmanteau to construct a novel about cryptography and codebreakers between WWII and the present, and there is even a popular cookbook called *Veganomicon* that provides a plethora of daily vegan recipes to cook at home. The name itself breaks down into three Greek words, a turn that Lovecraft manufactured to intervene within already solidifying orientalist discourses that evoked the arcane through the Old World. "Nekros," "nomos," and "eikon" chain together to form what Lovecraft translated as "an Image of the Law of the Dead."¹ Though there are debates about the accuracy of Lovecraft's etymology and his ability to translate Greek, two of his intended base words, "nomos/law" and

“eikon/image,” have become the building blocks for the proliferation of allusive compendia that draw on his example. Importantly for me, it is both law and image that serve as base interdisciplinary concepts within cultural studies, critical theory, videogame studies, and any field concerned with the representational and visual politics of race, gender, and indigeneity.

Lovecraft’s early twentieth-century anxieties about knowledge production, ancient grimoires, new technology, and the precarity of white masculinity threatened by interracial and interspecies miscegenation, illegal border crossings, land removals and allotments, and the possibilities of Indigenous and alien prior civilizations intervening against settled modes of capitalism, colonialism, and knowledge production are an instructive foil to our contemporary moment. In fact, Lovecraft’s *Necronomicon* is not just old-world arcana; it draws upon an imperialist transit of orientalism and indigeneity that links the Arab world to a nightmare possibility of threat that Indians also evoke as ontological prior in the new world (and within Lovecraftian mythos, American Indians are always presented as dupes, conduits for demonic possession, and gabbling creatures whose cultures formed around the mounds and remnants of something much, much older and deeply malevolent beneath the American continent). His work is deeply white supremacist and absolutely settler colonial as his frightful imaginary and the horror it instills hinges on the dissolution of whiteness as hegemonic conqueror with either the invasion of racial and alien otherness or the undoing of white civility into debauched savagery. But perhaps because (though never often fully acknowledged by those who most often evoke his work) Lovecraft’s literary horrors depend on the lasting racial, classed, and colonial animosities of U.S. empire, Lovecraft continues to circulate within the lurking realms of genre fictions, videogames, and even high theory. From the speculative realism strand of object-oriented ontology that post-Kantian philosophers including Graham Harman, Eugene Thacker, Ian

Bogost, and Levi Bryant theorize to videogames including *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem*, *Bloodborne*, *Alan Wake*, and *The Sinking City* to name only a few, Lovecraft's generic microcosmic universe of horror haunts the precipices of knowing and unknowing, fact and speculation, at the boundaries of belonging and exclusion where they all break down in pessimistic dissolution as well as rebuild in techno-optimistic hope for futurity. References and allusions to his work abound in the spaces where science fiction, horror, and videogames meet. To evoke Lovecraft either earnestly or parodically signals credibility within the realms of geek- and nerd-dom and to do so well provides authority and authenticity for cultural, political, and philosophical analyses of the point at which horror films, novels, videogames, and subjectivity meet.

In its way, Lovecraft's ephemeral *Necronomicon* serves as both sign and method for me in thinking structure and genre, offering in a critical distance from Lovecraft's mythology, a way to hold the contradictions and complexities of interdisciplinary scholarship to link philosophy, literary studies, Indigenous studies, settler colonial studies, and critical technology studies at the site of structure, genre, and videogames. That Lovecraft's work is fiercely antiblack, antisemitic, imperialist, and dependent upon settler colonial anxieties about immigration, indigeneity, and the violences of ongoing dispossession and the terrifying (to settlers) possibilities of decolonization allows an entry point to bring these discussions to the forefront of analysis in fields assumed either inoculated from such concerns or above them to intervene in ongoing conversations about videogames, code, and digital genres by locating them within ongoing settler colonialism and then charting how they have conditioned each other. In other words, because Lovecraft's entire law and image of worldbuilding depends on the logics of discovery, conquest, racism, and imperialism and often evokes indigeneity and race as the site of pathological terror, it becomes a

location through which to think about what Ruha Benjamin names “‘the New Jim Code’: *the employment of new technologies that reflect and reproduce existing inequities but that are promoted and perceived as more objective or progressive than the discriminatory systems of a previous era.*”² In profound ways, genre functions as analogue to code, and the return to structuralism that both videogames studies and settler colonial studies inaugurate as calls to understand systems of proceduralisms, law, operation, difference, and configuration, also serves as thresholds through which to understand how race and colonialism have always functioned within technology. As with those other compendia that have drawn on Lovecraft to signal an engagement with not just the macabre but the playful, *Indigenomicon* is, therefore, a study of “the image of the law of the Indigenous” as it functions as a site within settler colonial and imperial discourses that constitute the vectors of play and structure and that form the heart of the material stories digital technology enables, whether in the form of the book transformed or the game as narratively formed, framed, and played.

To focus on “the image of the law of the Indigenous” is not, however, to primarily focus on representations of the Indigenous—there are vast catalogs and archives of inaccurate, offensive, racist, and colonialist literary, visual, and sonic representations of Indigenous peoples that have accompanied the dispossession, genocide, and deculturation that Indigenous peoples have faced since the arrival of Europeans. And there is a range of work by Indigenous scholars addressing how those representations have served settler colonialism. Rather, and for my purposes throughout this book, to consider the “image of the law of the Indigenous” is think productively about how sites and signs of indigeneity—as well as its erasure and disavowal—function within the vectors of racial capitalism, ongoing dispossession, and the structures of inequality through which differential racializations occur in North American political, cultural,

economic, literary, and gamic registers. It is to understand not just the structures—the *nomos*—of colonialism in North America, but to bring those structures into conversation with technology and the videogames that technology enables. This chapter, therefore, seeks to conjoin a critical reading of how knowing and not knowing work in dialectical tension to produce horror as a structure at the intersection of philosophical, literary, and videogame narratives about the nature of the disturbed ontological, epistemological, and ludological relationalites produced by ongoing settler colonialism, racial capitalism and Indigenous dispossession.

The World-Without-Us

Horror represents a particular form of genre fiction that is deeply tied to the ongoing genocide and colonization of Indigenous peoples even as it also grapples with what Saidiya Hartman terms the “afterlives of slavery.”³ It is about disturbed relationalities, upended geographies, and dissolute ecologies brought about by unsettling encounters with racial, cultural, gendered, civilizational, and embodied differences that cannot undo the violences of history no matter how many times we return to the scenes of oppression, loss, and brutality as evidentiary. Meanwhile, and even as Eve Tuck and C. Ree observe that “mainstream narrative films in the United States, especially in horror, are preoccupied with the hero, who is perfectly innocent, but who is assaulted by monsterring or haunting just the same,” declaring a relationship between racial and colonial animosities and horror at the front rather than proving it by the end, runs the risk of *still* being accused of, if not reduction, then forcing a correlation where none exists. It is a given that almost goes without citation that “horror fictions are very much about ambiance, place, surroundings and environment,” and yet it is never quite acknowledged that each of those things, in North America at least, are inflected by racial capitalism, settler colonialism, and the deep-

seated valences of antiblackness and anti-Indigeneity that are fundamental to how the nation-state understands teleologies of space, place, democracy, freedom, progress, and development.⁴

Object-oriented philosophers and speculative realists, for example, would argue that horror is instead a result of an inability to confront, cohere, or control a world of objects that refuse and exceed our ability to perceive and think them, outside and beyond the historical, cultural, and political realms of the human. For Graham Harman specifically, Lovecraft is not a crafter of pulp horror so much as he is a sophisticated post-Kantian philosopher of gaps. “The philosophy of Kant proposes a gap between appearances and things-in-themselves,” Harman writes, “with no chance of a symmetry between the two; the things-in-themselves can be thought but never known.” Philosophers have two choices in this model, either work to destroy the gaps in the cosmos or work to proliferate them; for Harman, Lovecraft is a productionist writer counter to the German Idealists who decided that “to think of things-in-themselves outside thought is meaningless, for given that we do think of them, they are obviously an element of thought.” That Lovecraft writes horror is, for Harman, incidental; instead, reading him as a philosopher, Harman declares Lovecraft an “anti-idealist whenever he laments the inability of mere language to depict the deep horrors his narrators confront, to the point that he is often reduced to hints and allusions at the terrors inhabiting his stories.” In other words, “no other writer is so perplexed by the gap between objects and the power of language to describe them, or between objects and the qualities they possess.”⁵ This gap between objects and the power of language to describe them is, for Eugene Thacker, the mutual exclusivity of two sentences: “It’s all in your head. It really happened.” According to Thacker, horror exists in the interplay between both experiences, between a Kantian fear of being overwhelmed sensorially through the sublime of nature as aesthetics and being confronted with the fear of the unknown, with death.

This second register is Lovecraft's, Thacker argues in congruence with Harman: "while Kant is concerned with the limit *of* thought, Lovecraft is concerned with limit *as* thought."⁶

When Eve Tuck and C. Ree assembled "A Glossary of Haunting," they linked horror and haunting to the epistemic, ontological, and lasting violences of colonialism. "Colonization," they write, "is as horrific as humanity gets: genocide, desecration, poxed-blankets, rape, humiliation. Settler colonialism, then, because it is a structure and not just the nefarious way nations are born (Wolfe, 1999), is an ongoing horror made invisible by its persistence—the snake in the flooded basement" (642). And though Manu Vimalassery, Juliana Hu Pegues, and Alyosha Goldstein do not frame their study of colonial unknowing through horror necessarily, their analysis of the dynamics of colonial regimes of knowledge and relations addresses the horrifying implications of the limit *of* thought and limit *as* thought within the entanglements of ongoing settler colonialism, racial capitalism, Indigenous and Black dispossession, and the hegemonic structures of power that serve to obfuscate and misdirect awareness from the conditions of living in North America and the Caribbean. Articulating the production of both knowledge and ignorance as "a counter-formation" that "strives to preclude relational studies," they argue that "colonization is always for colonial knowledge regimes an encounter with peoples, socialities, knowledges, cosmologies, and relations to place with no innate relation to colonial suppositions of power, likely initially indifferent to the colonial self-appointment as the center of the world, as civilizational paragon."⁷ Rather than framing the hegemonic disavowal of ongoing and daily relations of colonialism in North America and the Caribbean as collective amnesia or omission, Vimalassery, Hu Pegues, and Goldstein argue that "the magnitude of this disavowal is not primarily of a forgotten or hidden past, at least to the extent that forgetting might be viewed as a passive relation or a concealed past might suspend culpability. Instead, this ignorance—this act

of ignoring—is aggressively made and reproduced.”⁸ The ongoing colonization of American is both “in our heads,” and “it really happened.”

True decolonization of North America is often dismissed within settler colonialism as yet another wrong now perpetuated upon too many innocent and arrivant people who have also born too many wrongs. Framed as a source of terror, as an inconceivable event of cataclysmic rupture toward dissolution to savage wildness, the decolonization of North America—and the return of land to and restoration of full political sovereignty for American Indian nations—is almost unthinkable. As Jace Weaver observes, “We have reached a point in this country where America itself is seen as some sort of zero-sum game. Whenever Native Americans assert their rights under treaties and the Constitution, they are seen as taking something away from non-Natives.”⁹ Somewhere between reconciliation and reparations, the idea of an Indigenous re-anything against settler colonialism produces a backward and fundamental horror that threatens precisely because it means the undoing and unbecoming of colonialism, civility, liberal democracy, and racial capitalistic accumulation through dispossession.

What is fascinating is that when it is thought, the entire scenario of decolonization as literal Indigenous return is recast in the financial metaphors of the repaying of debts that no one wants to admit they have incurred. In his 2013 book, *Returns: Becoming Indigenous in the 21st Century*, James Clifford, for one, declares the arrival of indigeneity to the fields of memory and diaspora studies, and in the process exemplifies the turn to the repaying of debts with his opening salvo that, “Indigenous people have emerged from history’s blind spot.”¹⁰ Linking Indigenous presence to the rise of globalizing neoliberalism during the 1980s and 1990s, Clifford spends much of his introduction outlining how our current cultural and political milieu might be reframed away from negative critiques of structural differences to focus on the positive

occasions for substantive change that might exist even within the precarity of biofinancialization and indebtedness that advance the deepening corporatization of every institution in North America. Going so far as to suggest that “neoliberalism opens possibilities for identity-based social movements while also powerfully channeling diversity and transformation,” Clifford sees the twenty-first century as a chance to realize the returns of indigeneity by understanding the rise of indigeneity as a category for critical analysis as an opportunity to finally capitalize on the dividends of modernity and to invest in the performance of authenticity as the possibility of transformation.¹¹ His notion of returns—figured through all the metaphoric meanings of valuation and profit as well as through the literal possibilities of Indigenous ancestral repatriation, land reclamation, and cultural resurgence—alongside his dialectical approach to neoliberalism as offering opportunities to realize the dividends of empire, might prompt rejoinders about what it means for indigeneity to arrive and under such terms of neoliberal financialization and social reproduction. In contradistinction to Clifford’s frame of return, the trap of neoliberalism is that it can only understand remediation through the language of profit, and inclusion is a corporate investment in civility that refuses structural transformation. Capitalism, Jodi Melamed emphasizes in following after Ruth Wilson Gilmore, is only ever racial capitalism; as such, it is “a technology of *antirelationality* (a technology for reducing collective life to the relations that sustain neoliberal democratic capitalism).”¹² And as Nick Estes proclaims in the final sentence of his *Our History is the Future*, “For the earth to live, capitalism must die.”¹³

But more, the thought that indigeneity might prove profitable after years of repression and disavowal, raises the specter of indigeneity’s place within the administrative, extractive, and logistical regimes of colonial racial capitalism. It is a fraudulent Cherokee ancestry asserted

through DNA tests rather than Cherokee recognition and sovereignty on the way to the presidency of the United States. The dialectical tensions that produce Indigenous returns as either profits and earnings on the one hand, and the idea that Indigenous peoples have somehow disappeared into the dustbins of history's blind spots to be claimed by and for settler benefit on the other, represent some of the fraught relationships between horror and dispossession that underscore the genres through which stories of decolonization might be told. The narrative of the Indian attack, imagined by Mary Rowlandson or John Ford, portends a story about a horde of undead, headdressed zombies, staggering out of forests in pursuit of scalps and captives. On the other side, Indians serve as a cautionary tale about what happens when a group of strangers from another land arrive and proceed to systematically eradicate all life on the planet. In Ray Bradbury's *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, a Cherokee wooden Indian statue multiplies itself to terrifyingly announce the arrival of Mr. Dark's traveling carnival. In "The Mound," a story H.P. Lovecraft wrote with Zealia Bishop, they describe a "deeper sense of the stupefying—almost horrible—ancientness of the West than any European" that haunts settlers as they encounter lands they only presume to be empty.¹⁴ For Freud, such ideas horrify precisely because they register as uncanny, creepily confirming suppositions that have been repressed only to return again and again.

There is a strange forgiveness of racism that accompanies horror, and in defense of Lovecraft who wrote screeds against the "the organic things –Italo-Semitico-Mongoloid– inhabiting that awful cesspool could not by any stretch of the imagination be call'd human," Graham Harman for one posits that while "racism can only make a philosopher worse...in certain rare cases, reactionary views might improve the power of an imaginative writer" in part because "the preposterous hyphenated form 'Italico-Semitico-Mongoloid' pushes us well beyond

any specific foreign race...”¹⁵ And despite Harman’s dismissal, “Italico-Semitico-Mongoloid” is, however, absolutely racially specific in both its “foreignness” as well as its racist “skull science” intent as a cacophonous formation evoking anti-immigrant, anti-Semitic, and anti-Asian discourses. Mongoloid, too, bears the further trace of indigeneity and serves to underscore the presumed savagery Lovecraft hated in all non-white others. As Lovecraft’s novellas, “At the Mountains of Madness,” “The Shadow Out of Time,” and “The Mound” demonstrate, what is most terrible at the limit of his thought is the evolutionary genealogy of survival-of-the-fittest-conqueror either devolved into savagery or overthrown by the enslaved.

These structures of who or what might constitute horror, then, often center upon the normative formulations of whiteness, masculinity, citizenship, and nationalism which then casts everyone else into the shadows to inspire fear as derealized monstrous others. The genres of horror exist alongside languages of eugenics and advancement, militarism and surveillance, subjectivity and sovereignty, critical theory and cultural studies, and its affective purchase continues to thrive upon absence, weirdness, loss, foreboding, and deviance. It produces the uncanny in the valleys of normativity and its exception. Horror is accompanied by graphic violence, and it sits alongside terror as a register that defines the twenty-first century zeitgeist. Within the colonization of North America, horror has deep historical roots tied to the nature of the project itself: to invade, conquer, claim, vanquish, enslave, torture, and replace is to produce and demand embodied violence and horror. It renders the post- as spectral threat within a future that will never come and a past that has never happened. Even as terror becomes canon within foreign and domestic policy, horror remains the preeminent genre of U.S. cultural productions, and in the past ten or so years, it has proliferated in the form of vampires, zombies, werewolves, and other paranormal monstrosities. The 24-hour social media cycle demands a visceral response

to horror as it continually returns to images of violence enacted upon and against African Americans, incarcerated migrants, and Indigenous communities in the United States while every institution in this country insists that race is never a factor in the targeted state violence.

In his book interrogating the biopolitical registers of racial assemblages through black feminist theories of the human, Alexander Weheliye uses the phrase *habeas viscus* “to signal on the one hand how violent political domination activates a fleshly surplus that simultaneously sustains and disfigures said brutality, and, on the other, to reclaim the atrocity of flesh as a pivotal arena for the politics emanating from different traditions of the oppressed.”¹⁶ Here, I want to think with Weheliye as he explains how flesh helps “excavates the social (after)life” of categories of humanity produced within and through dispossession, criminalization, exploitation, violence, and surveillance. Antiblackness in the United States relies on spectacles of visibility and invisibility to structurally extend racism while denying its presence at all. Avery Gordon, in reading Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* as a “double reference both to the unvisibility of the hypervisible African-American man and to the invisibility of ‘the Man’ who persistently needs an alibi for the blindness of his vision,” explores how spectacles of racial violence ultimately redirect attention away from its presence.¹⁷ In the process, the unvisibility of hypervisibility creates spectral afterimages that render race both absolutely legible, enfleshed, and completely obscured—the antiblack racism of Ferguson, Missouri police officer Darren Wilson justifying his murder of Michael Brown by insisting that he “look[ed] like a demon, that’s how angry he look[ed]” replays centuries of what Saidiya Hartman describes as the “scenes of subjection” in which the quotidian terror of slavery was routinized at the level of the everyday.¹⁸ The overlay of hyper- and un- within the registers of the perceived creates occasions to be haunted by repressed brutal social forces, and according to Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, the police and state response to

the uprising that followed Brown's death, "was intended to repress and punish the population, who had dared to defy their authority."¹⁹ Haunting, according to Gordon, is to perceive "how that which appears to not be there is often a seething presence, acting on and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities."²⁰

Indigeneity serves an inverse function within the haunted landscapes of a national imagination that thrives upon rendering colonialism—and the colonized—as the unfleshed, that which appears to not be there at all. Already well-theorized as ghost or specter within that system of not-thereness, the Indian is the return of the repressed, the sign of a living dead seething presence that is only assumed to be absent within the narratives of nation, territory, and security. As a paradigmatic sign, the Indian circulates within the terrains of horror as monstrous: the Indian burial ground, the merciless Indian savage, the shapeshifter, the wendigo. Horror confronts, faces, and is forced to face otherness; the Indian as sign acts upon and meddles with hegemony and commonsense, with the taken-for-granted realities that suture colonial occupation to territoriality and possession to subjectivity.

But to go further, horror, it might be said and to follow after Thacker, constructs a phenomenological colonial world-for-us, a worlding that orders space, terrain, language, and recognition into possession, territoriality, sovereignty, and planetarity. Horror exists, according to Thacker, in the unthinkable and the unknowable that exists in the spaces between earth as home and earth as rock orbiting the sun. As the world-for-us is transformed through natural disaster into not just the Earth, the world-in-itself, but into a spectral and anonymous planet that continues beyond and after all human life, that possible world-without-us looms, Thacker asserts, "somewhere in between, in a nebulous zone that is at once impersonal and horrific."²¹ Within the phenomenological fissures between and among the world-for-us and the world-in-itself, Thacker

argues, the world-without-us is a “‘dark intelligent abyss’ that is paradoxically manifest as the World and the Earth.”²² That unknowable, unapproachable, and *unthinkable* world-without-us that is the planetary has, within the colonial archive of the new world, depended upon the unthinking savage, and the condition of possibility, within Lovecraft again, that there was something older still, before Indians and their colonial masters. Aliens, monsters, Cthulhu, mounds.

That troubling sense of the unthinkable hovers at the edges of hearth and home, family and friends, as taunt and threat, creating the very real and imminent possibility that what is buried is about to rise, that what is forgotten is about to be remembered, and that what is unknown is about to be *known*. Horror, as a structure of colonialism’s narrative, resides in the truth of colonialism’s unbecoming, in the possibility that the world-for-us the colonizers created might one day fulfill the anticolonial imperative of a world-for-them. It is the transformation of the *propter nos* that Sylvia Wynter suggests is the fully human resolution to 1492 and its triadic subjective understandings of racism, colonialism, and capitalism.

Empire’s Dead

“If it is true,” Daniel W. Drezner writes, “that ‘popular culture *makes* world politics what it currently *is*,’ then the international relations community needs to digest the problem posed by flesh-eating ghouls in a more urgent manner.”²³ It is a charge, certainly, that U.S. biopolitical institutions have embraced much more unabashedly than the humanities and social sciences. In 2011, the Centers for Disease Control issued its Official Zombie Apocalypse Survival Guide as the standard for preparedness and the following year, Halo Corp. staged a zombie scenario on Paradise Point Resort island in San Diego to train U.S. Marines and Navy military personnel, police, and government officials metonymically for everything from natural disasters to terrorist

attacks. Gun enthusiasts hold zombie shoots to accompany skeet shooting competitions, and zombie runs routinely take place across the nation as an attempt to gamify the fight against obesity. Zombies are supposedly universal, apolitical representations who, according to one report, can be used to “avoid the pitfalls of using a mock enemy who could be identified by nationality, race or culture—something that could potentially be seen as offensive.”²⁴ Though Drezner’s pressing concern with zombies throughout his treatise tilts sardonically toward a broader need to introduce students to the methods of international politics, hinged however much by his own conservative agendas, his conditional logic necessitates a further consequence: if U.S. popular culture is imbricated with the psychic life of racial capitalism, settler colonialism, and empire, then zombies must be understood as the colonial undead other deprived of life, subjectivity, land, and home. Zombies disclose how racialization depends on demonization.

U.S. digital and media cultures continue to obsess over the reanimated dead as the inexorable culmination and unproductive consequence of postracial, queer liberalism run rampant (see for instance the 2004 *Dawn of the Living Dead* remake). Simultaneously an empty, negated referent and an infinitely overdetermined revenant, zombism has spread from its early twentieth-century filmic outbreak to infect the political, cultural, and economic imaginaries of our urgent now in ways that require not only an epidemiology of their shambling emergence, but a genealogy of the uncanny territories and valleys they chart.²⁵ On the one hand, zombies function as a colonial undead manifestation of the deep-seated histories of genocide, transatlantic and transpacific slave and coolie labor, and the neoliberal imperial manifestations of late capitalism that have resulted from centuries of unabated settler colonialism that defined freedom at the site of exclusion, slavery, and death. The abjected dead subjectivities of African Americans and American Indians triangulate the entangled structures of settler colonialism and

racial capitalism within the space of undead cannibalistic consumption where whiteness is (again) rendered as embattled civilization in an epic struggle to (re)claim the wilderness from the savage as in Sony Interactive Entertainment's *The Last of Us*. On the other hand, zombies serve as the literal return of the repressed, the dead who will not stay dead, a past that comes back to devour, and as such, they speak to the current moment of rendering subjects dead through the law, through imprisonment, detention, capture, and torture. Their cadaverous presence signals the limits of necropolitical law that can inflict death, but cannot ensure that those targeted will remain dead. Zombies terrify precisely because they are mimetically too precise. As Kyle Bishop observes, zombies haunt because they represent the “prospect of a westerner becoming dominated, subjugated, and effectively ‘colonized’ by a native pagan.”²⁶

As the cultural idiom of U.S. politics, then, the half-life of zombies has anxiously resurrected again and again within the genres of empire as simultaneously and counter-indicatively radical racial critique (think George Romero and *Night of the Living Dead*) and as a terrorist assemblage marking certain populations as *unheimlich*, uncanny, and *heimatlos*, uncountried (*28 Days Later*, *Resident Evil*). Appropriated from the crucible of the Black Atlantic, the figure of the zombie, by most scholarly accounts, is a new world creation that emerged from Haitian vodou practices that work to suture the psychic crossroads of oceanic drift to the genealogical limbo of continental arrival through slavery and indentureship. In the U.S. imperial context, however, zombie narratives have often arisen at historical moments defined by economic collapse—for instance, Victor Halperin's 1932 film *White Zombie* was the first horror film to draw upon the Haitian vodou practice of zombification and then cast it as racial threat against white womanhood in a parable of both U.S. imperial supremacy and the deeper anxieties redolent in empire's undoing in the midst of President Hoover's ineffective attempts to address

the Great Depression. Such stories serve as salve by reasserting the primal, imperial mastery of white, Christian patriarchal capitalism triumphing over temporary fiduciary impediments and the film does not disappoint as the white missionary's invisible hand realigns labor, gender, and death into their proper castes and places.

According to Cory James Rushton and Christopher Moreman, one of the tenets of academic zombie studies is that Deleuze and Guattari “proclaimed the zombie to be the ‘only modern myth’ in *Anti-Oedipus*, lending the motif a certain cultural cachet.”²⁷ (1). But it is in *A Thousand Plateaus* that Deleuze and Guattari explain how “the State apparatus makes the mutilation, and even death, come first. It needs them preaccomplished, for people to be born that way, crippled and zombielike. The myth of the zombie, of the living dead, is a work myth and not a war myth.”²⁸ The line of flight between work myth and war myth that Deleuze and Guattari counterdistinguish in their thought repatriates the modern iteration of zombie infection to its original iteration as reanimated corpse laborer in *White Zombie* at the same time that it anticipates Elizabeth Povinelli's argument in *Economies of Abandonment*, where late liberalism works on the corporeality of the body to make the enfleshment of the just coincide with the suffering of the other, the child in the broom closet.²⁹ As a necessary condition of its legitimation, the state depends, as Deleuze and Guattari assert, on the preaccomplished mutilation and death of the prior to establish the rigid, arborescent significations of state power, something Lisa Marie Cacho addresses in her work as the racialized social death of the rightless.³⁰

But one of the curious things about zombies is that in addition to their origins within the violences of the middle passage, they are horrifically intimate, attached to family and home as well as the spaces of domesticity and its rupture. There is something shockingly manicured about

the landscapes of zombie apocalypses that imagines the return of the dead as a continuance of domesticity that serves simultaneously as the last gasp of imperial hegemony. Amy Kaplan asserts that “to understand this spatial and interdependence of home and empire, it is necessary to consider rhetorically how the meaning of the domestic relies structurally on its intimate opposition to the notion of the foreign.”³¹ House and home serve to cohere space, to render it safely territorialized and domesticated even if the wilderness or the undead rage just beyond the edges of one’s own manicured lawn. The house is often a structural allegory for settlement, family, and futurity on the one hand and imprisonment, enslavement, and death on the other, and zombie narratives focus on the familial ties that link the infected and uninfected through the failed and failing zones of matrimonial, familial, and domestic bliss. The house is an articulation of the architecture of space and language that encloses within it the contradictory impulses of the panopticon—to protect and surveille, to secure. Zombies violate that security and disrupt the solidity of walls by challenging the stability of reason and the temporality of past, present, and future. The horror that results from the arrival of the walking dead refutes the security of the settled house and its promise of heteronormativity by presaging its fall, its collapse into desolate rubble reclaimed by a wilderness already racialized into a haunting and undead savagery. According to Anthony Vidler, the haunted house is “a crypt, predestined to be buried in its turn.”³² The fall of the house haunted takes with it any possible futurity by queering the family space and rendering it unproductive. As H.D. said in her *Tribute to Freud*, “We are all haunted houses.”³³

A House is Not A Home

Mark Z. Danielewski’s 2000 novel, *House of Leaves*, is not about zombies at all, but it is about the ways in which we continue to be haunted by the facades of structure and domesticity that

mask the sublime depths of territorial acquisition. It is required reading for many videogame designers and, for instance, if a player spends enough time searching the bookshelves in the Finch house of the critically acclaimed *What Remains of Edith Finch* (2017; Giant Sparrow), they will find multiple copies of *House of Leaves* scattered through the architectural mazes of the game's play space. Danielewski's novel, though, begins with a warning: "This is not for you." The book functions intertextually, drawing upon film, critical theory, and narrative to construct the world of the text—and deconstruct it in the course of drawing attention to the negative space around words on a page. *House of Leaves* charts the unthinkable as it breaches the space of the narrative by asking the reader to confront the materiality of the book itself as a three-dimensional, manipulatable object—a *house* if you will—that acts and is acted upon. Using braille, blue and red fonts, struck passages, and holes through which it is possible to see through the windowpane of words, *House of Leaves* is a book that, according to Neil Bamong, "seems to make the task of the literary theorist redundant."³⁴ And indeed, Danielewski's multilayered polyphonic narrative presents stories within stories all in the service of analyzing a documentary film that does not exist. Drawing upon phenomenology, semiotics, deconstruction, psychoanalysis, Marxism, feminism, and critical race theory, the book stages an analysis of blackness, fear, space, and architecture as a critical engagement of *The Navidson Record*, a film that documents a family's discovery that their new *house* is bigger on the inside than the outside—by 1/4 inch and growing. What starts as a typical twentieth-century urban pastoral—successful cosmopolitan journalist decides to buy a *house* in the country to reconnect with wife and kids—becomes the typical twentieth-century American gothic—all is not as it appears and family and marriage break down under the stress of the chasm that opens beneath and within the space of the *house*.

Above all, Danielewski's book is, as Bemong argues, a meditation on the uncanny, *unheimlich*, as it is deployed by Freud, Lacan, and Heidegger.³⁵ Danielewski intervenes against all three theorists to point out that, "*unheimlich* when used as an adverb means 'dreadfully,' 'awfully,' 'heaps of,' and 'an awful lot of.' Largeness has always been a condition of the weird and the unsafe; it is overwhelming, too much or too big. Thus that which is uncanny or *unheimlich* is neither homey nor protective, nor comforting nor familiar. It is alien, exposed, and unsettling, or in other words, the perfect description of the [house](#) on Ash Tree Lane."³⁶

This sense of largeness, too much or too big, and alien that Danielewski defines as *unheimlich*, captures through the domestic Thacker's concern of the Earth reframed not as home, but as planet, a unsettled world-without-us. When the astrophysicist that I discussed in the introduction to the book asked me about the applicability of grand questions to the humanities, she was likely trying to reframe the scale to express some of the sublime that comes with largeness. Black holes, for example, whether solitary or dancing together toward collision, cohere humanity together into a planetary temporality that exceeds the particularities of race, culture, nation, and even multiple lifetimes. In order to witness the collision of the nearest pair of black holes, scientists will have to wait millions of years. As an *unheimlich* event, the what ifs of black holes are dreadfully grand because they escape us as miniscule individuals. On that scale, the just decolonization of North America might seem a smaller question, a question tied to the world-for-us the makes our planet a home.

What intrigues about the horror of Navidson's [house](#) on Ash Tree Lane is that it considers what happens when home might contain the vastness of space. It expands, like the U.S. nation-state, to deferred excess beyond any set limit or boundary. Beginning with a ¼ inch interior increase to a closet on the second floor and ending with an interior doorway that leads to

an impossibly grand set of spiral stairs down to a labyrinth of infinite hallways inhabited by a beast or **minotaur**, the *unheimlich*, translated here by Danielewski as largeness, unhomeliness, and dreadfulness, is, I would argue, the unsettling excess of imperial accumulation, the too much of manifest expansion that supplements the creation of the domestic dependent *within* the colonizing nation-state. It is a rabbit hole of the infinitely regressive that places the territoriality of colonization into the abyss. It seems important here to note as proof that Danielewski's book includes an index that lists all fifty U.S. states, something which to my mind signals a coterminous national uncanny logics of dispossessive expansion, where, as Renée Bergland argues, "everyone, Czech to Chickasaw...must simultaneously acknowledge the American horror and celebrate the American triumph" of colonization.³⁷ Further, the **house** on Ash Tree Lane was reportedly built in 1720 in somewhere-not-quite-yet Virginia. Towards the end of the narrative and the film, Karen Navidson learns from her realtor the banality of the truth:

"I went ahead and checked if the house was built on an old Indian burial ground."

"And?"

"Nope. In fact, definitely not. It's all too marshy with winter rains and the James River nearby. Not a good place for a cemetery. So I looked for some murder or witch burning—though I knew, of course, that had all been Massachusetts folk. Nothing."³⁸

As the conversation continues, the realtor Alicia Rosenbaum explains, "Unfortunately, the only thing distinguished about your home's past, but I guess it's part of everybody's past around here, and it's no mystery either, would be the colony, the Jamestown Colony" (409). The disruption of the generically expected Indian burial site here as secret past frightfully revealed—in fact, definitely not—decenters the centrality of the Indian ghost to U.S. hauntings and recenters the uncanny upon the first site of European settlement as dreadfully spatial and temporal. In other

words, *House of Leaves* structurally attempts to demonstrate one of the grand questions of literary studies by formally making the material object of the physical book, which represents itself through the golden ratio spiral pictured on the cover, stand in for the expansiveness of space beyond humanity.

The narrative makes it a point to flag how the documentary film defers the Jamestown Colony as the site of some originary pathology: “It is not surprising,” we are told, “*The Navidson Record* does not pause to consider this reference, especially considering that Karen is far more concerned about the house and Navidson’s whereabouts than she is with 17th century history” (409). The horror that is the colonial reiterated in the post- lies within this meaning that no one pauses for—within the Jamestown archives of 1610, the narrative reveals a few pages later, three men go out hunting and are never seen alive again. The last entry of the journal they leave behind reads: “Ftaires! We haue found ftaires!” (414). The final observation of the narrative is this:

As everyone knows, instead of delving into the question of location or the history of the Jamestown Colony, *The Navidson Record* focuses on Alicia Rosenbaum in her dingy little office talking to Karen about her troubles. It may very well be the best response of all: tea, comfort, and social intercourse. Perhaps Rosenbaum’s conclusion is even the best: ‘lord knows why but no one ever seems comfortable staying there,’ as if to imply in a larger way that there are some places in this world which no one will ever possess or inhabit (414).

This turn to the domestic safety of tea and comfort counterpoints the uncanny world-without-us and forces readers to overlook the significance of three Jamestown colonists finding a set of stairs leading down into the abyss in the middle of the savage wilderness in 1610. Caught in a

dialectic that pairs comfort and comfortable with possession, *House of Leaves*'s ironic asides of "it is not surprising," and "as everyone knows" signal the hegemonic processes through which colonialism remains unknowable even though it is structurally foundational to interpretation. It points to the *unheimlich* condition of colonialism that prevents any house as structure from being a home within settlement, how there are indeed some spaces no one will possess or inhabit. Danielewski's novel demonstrates in scale ratio how the questions of STEM and American Indian and Indigenous studies might in fact be equally grand. And it also rehearses the glancing away required by settler colonialism that refuses to grapple with the fact that the world-for-us is and has been a world-without-us all along.

Telling Dead Tales

I want to shift from this discussion of *House of Leaves* to look at the similarly vexed relationship videogames have to these questions of the sublime and spatial production, of narrative and interpretation, of structure and architecture, of technology and machines, and of the horror of settlement and its undoing. Where *House of Leaves*, according to N. Katherine Hayles, "uses the very multi-layered inscriptions that create the book as a physical artifact to imagine the subject as a palimpsest, emerging not behind but *through* the inscriptions that bring the book into being," videogames, in Ian Bogot's view, "show players the unseen uses of ordinary materials."³⁹ As I discussed in the introduction to this book, videogame studies has been haunted by the role narrative plays (or does not) in the structure of games, with a range of critical voices and disciplines offering contradictory, sometimes, contentious arguments. As a debate, it is, at this point, often evoked as a cautionary tale of early disciplining ripostes, an overstated parable of two entrenched camps fighting on the hill of narratology versus ludology when it is not just outright dismissed as an irrelevantly outdated fray from the frontier shootouts of early

videogame studies. At the risk of being retrograde, I continue to return to this founding question of the relationship videogames have to narrative and story as a necessary framing starting point if only because it signals the stakes for what critical gaming studies might be in conversation with critical Indigenous studies, settler colonial studies, queer studies and critiques of colonial racial capitalism. As a medium, videogames are highly (re)mediated objects in search of the critical theory through which to analyze them, with books, photography, film, and television evoked as precursors that are quickly surpassed in the shift to games as machinic, coded, and platformed material technology indebted to histories of embodied play as much as to the visual, narrative, and audio cultures of those prior media. They are conspicuously capitalistic, militaristic, and imperial. Even so, videogames continue to emphasize story and narrative as constitutive of worldbuilding, immersion, and representational logics.

Given the fierce attachment white and masculinist communities have had to videogames in the North American and Pacific settler colonies and the maintenance of certain kinds of fandoms over others, scholars in the field of videogame studies find themselves having to constantly qualify their interventions as they articulate videogames as simultaneously exceptional and mundane, as mass produced within global supply chains of cutting-edge technological development and as run-of-the-mill pop cultural playgrounds somehow untouched by the ideological concerns of the present to negotiate the demand that videogames be framed as outside cultural and political critique on the one hand and positioned as a legitimate art form on the other. Indeed, and for some, there has been a sense that videogames and gamers are easy targets for moral panics—ranging from gun violence to white supremacist and misogynist violence—that cultural theorists themselves supposedly perpetuate every time they critique a game for its representation of empire, colonialism, race, religion, gender, and/or sexuality. Still,

according to Soraya Murray, “video games represent powerful invocations of the lived world in playable form, which offer insights into the core fears, fantasies, hopes and anxieties of a given culture in a specific cultural context.”⁴⁰ As invocations of the “lived world in playable form,” videogames become a site through which to interrogate core questions that circulate around what that lived and playable world enable and for whom.

Elsewhere, Murray posits a caution about the actual work “postcolonial” criticisms of videogames conceivably do in the circulation of the neoliberal university by pointing to how “critical studies may fall into the trap of institutionalization, generating analysis as the products of academia’s neoliberal turn.” The concern, of course, is that performing, codifying, and institutionalizing critiques of videogames for what they enact at the embodied level of play within the contexts of ongoing settler colonialism, gendered violence, racial capitalism, and imperialism merely serves the diversity agenda of the neoliberal academy towards inclusion without radically transforming any of the structures of power. Given the risks, that means, for Murray, engaging games with an eye toward a “public good” by intervening in “public debates as a counter-discourse to the prevailing narrative, which is ethically anemic.”⁴¹

For me, the questions that form the heart of this book are not about correcting inaccurate representations toward doing race, gender, and indigeneity in videogames somehow decolonially “better”; rather, I am concerned with understanding how the discursive logics of dispossession circulate within the public cultures of settler colonialism and racial capitalism, how those logics shape what it is we can know and not know, be and not be, achieve and fail, and finally, how temporality, materiality, structure, and space all conform within videogames to maintain regimes of violence and dispossession at the level of narrative.

Throughout this analysis of horror genre, I have repeatedly evoked Patrick Wolfe's formulaic pronouncement that settler colonialism is "a structure, not event." It is a quote that has come to signal in shorthand axiom the settler colonial turn within critical theory, and Wolfe's words have the grace of being both simple and straightforward in their delineation of definition. And because Wolfe pinpoints settler colonialism as structural, he invites scholars who follow him to think carefully about what it means to engage in structuralist critiques of law, politics, culture, governance, and power. One of the things that continues to fascinate me, though, is how, in attempting to cordon videogames off from literary and cinematic reading practices, theorists in the field insist instead on the necessity of the materiality of object and structure. As Christopher Paul observes in his analysis of the toxic meritocracy of video games, "thinking deeply about the structures of games, both how they are built and the stories they tell, articulates the terms on which players play games."⁴² To study video games as structure means remembering the invisible materiality of code, algorithms, and procedures that lie beneath and behind the visual, the narrative, and the representational. Code, presumably, is not interpretable at all but is, rather, a structure that enacts a world by running real time in the background to create the conditions necessary for play in the first place. But here is where the narrative components of games still matter, and I want to argue that, given how story continues to haunt videogames the same way machines and codes haunt *House of Leaves*, videogames should be read as structures comprised primarily of events, whether cut scene, quick time, or other forms of event that propel the fiction that the agentive self is capable of transformative action within the constraints of play. And those events—like the code itself—are steeped in settler colonial, misogynistic, and antiblack ideologies.

So, despite all the proclamations that the question of whether games tell stories is dead, the debate continues to reanimate anytime a game emerges to push the bar of what games might achieve as playable narrative worlds. And even *Fortnite* has been celebrated for innovating how story might be told now that its tenth season has ended with a black hole devouring the entire game world and the players along with it. As a subgenre within video games, survival horror depends on narrative as well as aesthetics and atmosphere to produce the subjective horror of having to navigate an onscreen avatar through constant precarity toward survivability. There are two games that I want to look at more closely for the remainder of this chapter. The first is Supermassive Games's overlooked AAA 2015 release for the PlayStation 4 entitled *Until Dawn*. Marketed as an "unpredictable and dynamically adaptive story" that uses "innovated choice mechanics and the Butterfly-Effect Interface," *Until Dawn* puts the player in control of eight young adults as they reconnect a year after the tragic disappearance and presumed death of twin sisters Hannah and Beth Washington. Rather than presenting players with what Eve Tuck and C. Ree suggest is the fundamental disservice of U.S. horror films, that the "heroes are innocent, and that the ghouls are the trespassers," *Until Dawn* attempts to narratively transform the possibilities of horror stories by first telling us that most if not all of the playable characters in the game are in fact guilty in the events that led to the death of the twins and then telling players that their choices (and ability to hit the right buttons in the right sequence at the right time) will determine who survives the night. If you make the "right" choices and button presses, it is possible to save all but one of the main characters—a twist on the clichéd modes of horror movie characters that include "the jock," "the token minority," "the final girl," and "the blonde." According to fan lore around the game, the final script had over ten thousand pages of dialogue.⁴³

The game sets up at least three different possible horror film homages for the players to survive—the slasher, the mystery thriller, and the horrific monster—and then lets the player manage exploration of the massive Washington family estate, a partially collapsed iron mine, an abandoned sanatorium, and the remnants of hotel underneath the family estate built on Blackwood Mountain as it settles (pun intended) into the story it wants to tell through all the classic jump scares and misdirects endemic to cinematic narrative horror. *Until Dawn*'s cast of actors includes Rami Malek, Hayden Panettiere, Nichole Bloom, and Jordan Fisher who provide motion capture, voice acting, and just the right amount of racial and gender diversity to fulfill neoliberal representational algorithms for a game released the year following #GamerGate's attack on women and minorities in the gaming community. More, set in Pacific Northwest Canada, likely somewhere in Alberta close to the border with British Columbia, the game tries to integrate the horror of a wintery wilderness mountain sublime with historical and cultural authenticity. The result is that, though the game acknowledges Indigenous presence through its mishmash of Cree and Pacific Northwest Coastal cultural artifacts scattered throughout as collectibles and in fact relies on that presence to construct the “butterfly effect” mechanic drawn from chaos theory that supposedly innovates how games might finally let players play story, that presence is radically stereotypical, often outright fabricated, and ultimately illegible despite its hypervisibility in the game. It does not do anything in the game beyond signal settler anxieties about the past, about multicultural sensitivity, about guilt, and about ownership and control of the land. For example, Josh (Rami Malek) insists on calling his blonde friend Chris (Noah Fleiss) “Cochise” throughout the early scenes of the game as a toxic dig at Chris's masculinity and his timidity around “the lovely ladies” in the game. According to the game's online wiki, not only does Josh's nickname for Chris refer “to the name of a Native American leader,” it

“coincidentally ties in with the Native American aspect of the game.” Finally, the wiki helpfully adds that, according to Urban Dictionary, “Josh’s nickname for Chris means ‘badass.’”⁴⁴

As for more tie-ins with “the Native American aspect of the game,” the entire “butterfly effect” derives, players are told on an in-game menu screen, from “Indigenous tribes” who “believed that butterflies brought dreams and premonition.” Scattered throughout the game are remnants of totem poles that serve as collectible “prophecies” and warnings that foreshadow possible death scenarios for each of the playable characters. If you successfully find all the prophecy totems for the five poles name Death, Guidance, Loss, Danger and Fortune, you are rewarded with a short film entitled “The Events of the Past” that finally reveals the truth about the fictive Blackwood Mountain. That mystery, players eventually learn from “Flamethrower Guy,” an in-game character voiced and motioned-captured by Larry Fessenden, a veteran horror filmmaker who also co-wrote the script for the game, is that the original Indigenous inhabitants considered the mountain sacred, but abandoned it after settlers desecrated it in the nineteenth century mining for iron. Then, in the 1950s, a group of miners survived a cave-in by turning to cannibalism in the darkness of the tunnels, and in the process, released the curse of the wendigo spirits that swirl the mountain and call it home. In the final beats of the three-minute film, Flamethrower Guy explains that the night of Hannah and Beth’s disappearance, he was hunting his grandfather’s nemesis, the ancient wendigo named “Makkapitew,” who was itself tracking the twins for food. Building off the context of this short film, the final final reveal of the game’s source of horror is that one of the twins, Hannah, turned to cannibalism out of desperation, ate her dead twin in the collapsed mine to survive starvation, and is now one of the wendigos haunting the game and attacking the eight playable characters in search of revenge for the prank they played on her.

Cree literary scholar Dallas Hunt reads similar science fiction and horror genre narratives through Margery Fee's discussion of "totem transfer" stories. Such stories, he explains, center on white settlers encountering the remnant of a forgotten tribe, receiving some kind of gift, and then in effect becoming the rightful heirs to that tribe's land and cultural patrimony. "The totems in these narratives," Hunt observes, "are metonyms for the land and Indigenous claims to it; so, in gifting the totem, the Indigenous peoples are symbolically releasing their holds over the lands."⁴⁵ In *Until Dawn*, Flamethrower Guy tells the playable characters that he doesn't "take kindly to you kids coming up here to my mountain," a moment in-game that serves at least two purposes: first, to metonymically acknowledge Fessenden's real life authorial authority in creating the fictive mountain for the game, and second, to signal some prior generational totem transfer that must have occurred for Flamethrower Guy's grandfather that then transfers to the protagonists of the game when they receive his journal after he is beheaded by wendigos in the scene immediately following his first speaking appearance in the game. The totem collecting mechanic of *Until Dawn* serves a similar and literal transfer function, where abandoned totems are scattered throughout the game's locations for players to find, collect, and in collecting gain the power and knowledge to affect the outcome of survival for each of the characters. Settler co-optations of "wendigo," according to Hunt, serves as similar totem transference effect. The entire game, then, traffics in a hypervisible unknowing about the "Indigenous tribes" the game symptomatically evokes only to immediately disappear again and again through stereotype and fictive nonsense.

Nowhere is this dynamic more evident than in one of the small pieces of "evidence" about the "mystery man" that players discover on a table in one of the rooms of the sprawling Washington family estate. In a 2013 letter addressed to a "Dr. C. J. Swaffham, Race and

Ethnicity Department, 183 Haskell Hall, 6130 Amsterdam Road, Vancouver, BC,” Josh and the twins’ mother, Melinda Washington, expresses concern about “unfortunate problems” that have plagued the Washington Lodge including “graffiti, people sleeping in the outbuildings.” “It’s good to know,” she writes to the presumably settler authority on Indians in the Race and Ethnicity Department of some unnamed academic institution, “that the tribe still feel an attachment to the land here...this is their ancestral home after all.” The letter goes on to indicate that she plans to send a donation to their “elder council,” concluding the letter with the observation that “healing the wounds of the past won’t be easy, but I feel it’s a step that is necessary.” Players find the letter early in the game and it is one source of misdirection, hinting that the mystery man and psycho also stalking the game are possibly disgruntled indigent Indians stalking the mountain in the hopes of getting their land back in an act of misguided revenge-seeking. Indianness is evoked in *Until Dawn* as a prior source of knowledge and as a possible, but ultimately non-existent, threat. Nowhere in the game do players interact with contemporary Indigenous peoples, in no way do players encounter anything culturally accurate in any of the evocations of indigeneity that appear in game, and they are left with the reconciliatory gestures of monetary “gifting” as a just compensation for ongoing settler occupation.

In what is perhaps the most troubling aspect of the game’s racial and colonial animosities, it turns out that Josh has “gone off his meds” in his grief over the loss of his sisters and is in the middle of a psychotic break as he seeks revenge for his sisters’ disappearance with an elaborate plot to torture his friends in punishment for what they did to Hannah the previous year. The game constructs the Washington family as quintessentially white, rich, and settler established, and the casting of Rami Malek in the lead role and as the true human psycho preying on his friends could be read simply as a liberal gesture of colorblind casting in an industry that

centers and prioritizes white masculinity to a fault. Given the rampant settler colonial discourses evoked through the game's horrorscape, I would suggest additionally that the game transits indigeneity into North African arrivant as part of the inescapable horror plot it wants to construct as a deflection of guilt and innocence at the core of the game's narrative mechanics. Malek is at this point an established Egyptian American actor best known for his Oscar award-winning portrayal of Freddie Mercury in *Bohemian Rhapsody* three years after *Until Dawn*'s release, and his racial, ethnic, and indigenous indeterminacy functions in the game to shift accountability for the violences of colonialism from the white victims of the wendigo spirit to the insane immigrant arrivant who threatens to upend the totem transfers the game imagines. Malek's Josh is the only unsaveable and irredeemable playable character in the game—after the final credits roll and the game tallies who the player managed to keep alive, depending on their choices, they might find Josh still stuck in the collapsed mines slowly degrading in his madness into possession by a Wendigo spirit. Unlike his sister Hannah whose Wendigo transformation is presented as a tragic turn the playable characters constantly apologize to her for, Josh's possession is the continuation of horror at the site of deserved punishment, degenerate madness, and failed civility and settlement—he attacks the park rangers sent to recover him, and the game goes to black on their screams as he tears them apart and devours them.

What Remains of Settlement

The second game I want to discuss is Giant Sparrow/Annapurna's 2017 title, *What Remains of Edith Finch*. Hailed as a masterful achievement in videogame-as-vignette-anthology, the game beat out *Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, *Assassin's Creed Origins*, and *Super Mario Odyssey* for the BAFTA's 2018 Best Game Award. It also received Best Narrative from Game Developers Choice Awards, and was named *Games for Change* 2018 game with the best

gameplay. Celebrated for its ability to not only tell compelling stories through gameplay but to inspire empathy by asking players to witness firsthand death and grief within a family through generations, *What Remains of Edith Finch* invites players to navigate through the precariously expanded Finch family house on Orcas Island, Washington State, uncover its secrets, and inhabit by entering to play the death scenes of each deceased member of the cursed Finch family.

“Video games give players a chance to actualize subject positions, to become a new kind of person, which could make games a perfect place for experimentation” Christopher Paul writes, and for some, *Edith Finch* is a game that so far comes closest to realizing that gamic possibility.⁴⁶ For others, *What Remains of Edith Finch* is nothing more than yet another glorified walking simulator in the vein of *Gone Home* or *Firewatch*. According to Ian Dallas, creative director for Giant Sparrow, *Edith Finch* is “each of the stories is really about what it means to be overwhelmed.”⁴⁷

Though the game is initially navigated through the first-person shooter camera (hence, the charge that it is, at best, a walking simulator), the game breaks convention with shooters and simulators alike by creating playable character studies that introduce different control mechanics to construct each of the playable aspects of the game. For instance, to learn how ten-year-old Molly Finch died, you enter her childhood poisonous berry-induced delirium to become in progression of food-chain hunters, a cat, an owl, a shark, and a tentacled Cthulhu-like monster ravenously devouring first birds and rabbits and then seals and sailors. Or, for Calvin Finch, you find yourself using both joysticks in tandem to swing your legs faster and faster until the swing you are on loops the top and you-as-Calvin fly off the edge of the cliff and into the ocean below. The game starts you out, innocently enough, on a ferry headed to Orcas Island and as the title of the game recedes into the background to the sound of the ferry horn and Bach, you gain control

of the camera, look around, and finally center on a journal entitled “Edith Finch” resting on your lap. With a press of a button and the flick of a joystick, the journal opens and Edith’s voice reads the words on the page to you, “A lot of this isn’t going to make sense to you and I’m sorry about that,” and then with another joystick turn of the page, Edith begins to tell you about her family tree/house as you step into her POV. This mechanic of entering the nested POV perspectives of each of the dead Finch family members sets the stage for how you play the game—from peeping into eye holes drilled into the sealed mausoleum doors of the deceased Finch family members’ bedrooms in the sprawling, labyrinthine found-object-converted-to-living-space home to crawling through secret passages to find relics and remnants of treasured letters, photos, or mementos that then propel you head first into the playable final moments of each Finch as he or she is overwhelmed and then lost, the game creates a sense of the weird, the sublime, and the fantastic through the constant architectural and scopic disorientation of constantly looking with and through someone else’s eyes.

But in all of the game’s strange intimacy, uncanny domesticity, and eerie invocation to share in the Finch family’s grief, the game’s overarching narrative is first and foremost one of lasting white settlement in spite of its fragile, overwhelmed, and *unheimlich* futurity. As you untangle the Finch origin story, you eventually learn about patriarch Odin and his attempts to outrun the five-hundred-year-old family curse that had him, after his wife’s sudden, tragic, and unexpected death, sailing from Norway in 1937 to the San Juan Islands off the coast of Washington state with his ancestral house, daughter Edie, son-in-law Sven, and granddaughter Molly in tow. Alas, and because of the curse that limits the living Finch to only one, the house sinks not far from shore with Odin inside; it is up to Sven and Edie to bury their dead patriarch on land and build their new home on Orcas Island, complete with a Finch family totem pole with

Molly-as-owl on top that Sven carves not long before he dies trying to make a dragon slide for his son Walter's twelfth birthday. Despite the constant attrition and subtraction of Finches, somehow the house itself consumes more and more space, expanding architecturally into treetops, looming out over the cliffs above the ocean, and into subterranean caverns to enshrine the eccentric and insular family members on their way to death and still, somehow, lasting settler continuance in the literal house as a settler colonial structure facilitated through event after event. It is no coincidence that multiple copies of Danielewski's *House of Leaves* populate the many bookcases scattered throughout the Finch home.

And while each of these pieces are fascinating in their own right, it is Lewis Finch's story and minigame that critics and players have found almost unanimously the most compelling and innovative. Lewis is referenced early in the game as Edith's older brother who worked at the local salmon cannery, and it is his death that compels their mother to finally flee the house with her only surviving child in the hopes of saving them both from the dreaded curse of unfortunate and untimely death. Despite the mention of him early in the game, Lewis's story is one of the final stories you play—and it is one of the longest and most realized. As you enter his addition at the top of the house, you find the living space of a pothead and gamer, complete with hookahs, sitar music, blacklight, game systems, and even a marijuana leaf poster. His bedroom has apparently been partially built from a repurposed boat, and upon crawling through its windshield to gain access, Edith remarks that Lewis's room “smelled very, *very* familiar,” that that smell was the one thing of him that lingered still. Progressing further into the room, you eventually find a box of Lewis's belongings from the cannery with a letter addressed to his mother, Dawn Finch, on top near his computer desk—when you pull the letter out and begin to read it, the gametic action triggers a voiceover shift from Edith to that of an older British female psychiatrist

writing to provide insight and explanation into Lewis's suicide as you find yourself slipping from Edith's POV into Lewis's monotonous daily grind of beheading salmon at the cannery. When you finally have control of Lewis, you quickly acclimate to the controls as it becomes clear that your right joystick controls his right hand and arm as it feeds salmon into the mechanized guillotine that menacingly swooshes every time your hand comes near. Your job as gameplay is to grab a salmon as soon as it arrives at your station, slide it into the slicer to your right, and then push it forward onto the conveyor belt so that it can move further down the line for processing. And then you grab the next and repeat. While you continue to push salmon through the motions in a rightward slide, Lewis's story continues to unfold through the narrator's voice, and soon a portion of the left side of the screen begins to change and encroach on the space of the salmon station Lewis is working at the cannery. The narrator's voice pauses midsentence until you figure out through trial and error that your left joystick now controls a videogame-like avatar of Lewis as his mind starts to wander at work and his imagination takes over to create a fictional world to explore. Game critic Philippa Warr describes the central mechanic of Lewis's story as essentially a version of "patting your head and rubbing your tummy" multitasking as your right thumb continues feeding salmon into the slicer and your left thumb navigates the Lewis avatar through an increasingly elaborate fantasy realm.⁴⁸

As a disaffected laborer and recovering addict, Lewis quickly loses himself in the fantasy he constructs as escape—initially rendered in simple 2D graphics, an old-school RPG dungeon crawler with skeletons and bats, but as Lewis's left-sided world begins to intrude on his day job, the graphics shift and evolve to reflect how videogames themselves have evolved over the past twenty years until you are finally and fully recaptured in the 3D, first-person camera that is the hallmark of this era's gaming achievement. In his imaginary world, Lewis adopts a dog,

composes songs and starts a band; meanwhile, he stops speaking at the cannery though his work never falters, and he is, we are assured, an efficient, reliable, productive, and model employee. His fantasies grow more elaborate as he realizes that his imaginary realm is his to do with as he wants, and so he holds an election for mayor and then wins. He soon decides that is not enough, however, that there is more to experience in the world of his wandering mind so he sets out on a voyage of discovery and as he sails up a river, he conquers and renames cities to New Lewisville, St. Lewis, and Minneapolewis in a mimetic reproduction of settlements on the Mississippi river. He eventually hears, the narrator explains, about either a beautiful prince or a handsome princess, and whether the player chooses the queer branch or the straight both lead to his ascension to the throne of the world he has created and a coronation at the end. That ending ultimately puts you back in control of Lewis at the cannery where his mind has dissociated from his body and you observe through his imaginative avatar the “real life” Lewis’s abject labor mutilating salmon as he stands almost inanimately with his head bowed over his station. Ensnared in Lewis’s imaginative POV that desires the fulfilment of his quest to become sovereign, your final act as Lewis’s avatar is to kneel and accept the crown. The moment of ascension is on rails, though, and you have no choice; arriving at the end enacts Lewis’s final act of refusal and leads to his beheading by the automated guillotine he has been feeding salmon to all along—with the final swoosh of the blade, Lewis’s gameplay stops and you return to Edith still holding the letter in her hand in Lewis’s room.

According to Warr’s analysis of Lewis’s story, creative director Ian Dallas associated the state of Washington with salmon. “It was both a literal presence and a symbolic one,” she explains, “encountered in supermarkets and local reservations as well as its use in Native American art from the region. It was also a way of referencing one of the older themes of the

game: the sublime horror of nature.”⁴⁹ And because salmon represents both Native Americans and “the sublime horror of nature” for the designers who worked on the game, it is one of the only ways that Indigenous presence makes its way into the physical and imagine geographies of the world the game allows players to play. For the game, “the sublime horror of nature” equates to indigeneity, to salmon, to land, to ocean, and to the rest of the natural world in expansive succession. Though the game provides no real background on the game’s setting, Orcas Island is part of the San Juan Islands in the Haro Strait between Washington State and British Columbia, and it is part of the traditional lands of Coast Salish peoples, primarily Lummi.⁵⁰ Salmon canneries in the Pacific Northwest and into Alaska are sites of extractive colonial racial capitalism, dependent upon Indigenous dispossession, and for much of the nineteenth into early twentieth century, Asian migrant and seasonal labor. The invention of mechanized salmon-butcher machines such as the one Lewis operates notoriously displaced Asian workers at the beginning of the twentieth century and was nicknamed the “Iron Chink.” Within the colonial unknowing and *unheimlich* contours of *What Remains of Edith Finch*, those colonial and racial intimacies and formations are referenced without acknowledgment, yet their presence serves a stark discursive function.

Though Lewis Finch and his sister Edith are presented in game as initially presumed white, players learn they are in fact mixed-race South Asian when it is revealed that Dawn’s husband—and their father—was Sanjay Kumar, a relief aid worker who died tragically in a third world earthquake in 2002 when Edith was three. It might be tempting to read this diversification of the Finch family through what Lisa Nakamura refers to as “Gaming’s Cruel Optimism,” the neoliberal multicultural attachment to the hope that simply including racial, gender, and sexual difference in games will somehow transform the often violently racist, homophobic, and

misogynistic structure of them for the sheer fact that they will have been made to be inclusive. And certainly, the branching path of Lewis's conquering journey upstream that lets him choose either a prince or princess as reward serves that inclusive gesture that does not make any structural difference to the play. But there is something uncanny within that representational logic at the site of Indigenous dispossession and the racialization of labor.⁵¹ Reading those ten to fifteen minutes of Lewis's story through what Iyko Day identifies as "alien capital," a triangulation of settler colonial capitalism that depends upon "patterns of Indigenous decimation and dispossession, racialized labor recruitment and exploitation, [and] immigrant restriction and internment," it is possible to see how the game reproduces differential racializations for Asians, Blacks, and Natives within the context of white settler supremacy, where "Asians have personified the abstract dimensions of capitalism through *labor time*" precisely because their "identification with a mode of efficiency [...] was aligned with a perverse temporality of domestic and social reproduction."⁵² What this means within the context of *Edith Finch* is that Lewis's abjection as pure mechanized labor that the gamer performs as part of the gameplay replicates the "iron chink" guillotine machine that he operates and that supposedly makes his salmon processing more efficient—Lewis becomes abstract value in his (non)racialized identification in-game.

Moreover, this condition of perverse domestic and social reproduction haunts Sanjay Kumar as he is absorbed into the Finch family tree and its curse without leaving much more than a sketched trace in his daughter's journal along with a smiling family photo and newspaper clipping in his wife's room. His children bear his wife's maiden name, and his subjectivity is not one the game allows the player to ever imagine or inhabit. His perverse sexuality and perverse temporality manifest in his disappearance from settler presence in Washington State—he is

already elsewhere, migrant, never arrived in the present of the game before he ever dies and his children assimilate into the Finch family name, the Finch curse, the Finch house—all to serve Finch settlement. Within the context of this ongoing Finch settlement on Orcas Island, Lewis's imaginative world sets him out as conquering settler-hero renaming the major cities along the Mississippi after himself in the game, precisely because his real life is presented as completely opposite—he was sent into rehab to deal with his pot smoking and then to the cannery by his white mother to be responsible, he has no friends beyond those he invents in his head, and he eventually takes his own life using the machinery of the gory, blood-soaked cannery that he has become in the day in and day out of the efficient processing of abstract labor value. In her forthcoming book on the differential racializations of settler colonial capitalism that produced the canneries as sites of Asian men and Native women's labor in the Pacific Northwest and Alaska specifically, Juliana Hu Pegues builds on Day's analysis of Asian perverse temporality within labor regimes of settler colonial racial capitalism to theorize that "their temporal perversion is enacted as a *spatial failure*; that is, an inability to remain residents or become settlers" that postpones settler time even as the triadic structures of racialization and exclusion further the extractive and dispossessive regimes of domination of Indigenous peoples and lands.⁵³

Lewis's own perverse temporality, sexuality, and spatiality, then, no matter which romantic path the player chooses to follow, echoes his father's and signifies how the Asian laborer is unable to settle or remain within the discursive realms of white settlement. As a South Asian mixed-race woman voiced by a white actor, the titular Edith's un/known racialization serves a slightly different function. Not long before she enters Lewis's room, Edith tells the player that she is pregnant, but it is not until after her mother dies of a prolonged illness at the end of the game that the player learns that the "you" she has been addressing throughout the game is in fact

her unborn son and not the player. The game ends dramatically with that son (and you as player) emerging from Edith's birth canal, when it finally becomes clear that the whole game (spoilers, sorry) was actually his reading of the journal Edith had left behind as he traveled to Orcas Island to visit his mother's grave years after she died giving birth to him in 2017, the same year the game was released. On the final page of the journal, she writes the following to the son she never gets to meet: "This is where your story begins. I'm sorry I won't be there to see it. It's a lot to ask, but I don't want you to be sad that I'm gone. I want you to be amazed that any of us ever had a chance to be here at all. Good luck, Edith." Projecting a settler futurity for her son as the last of the Finches, Edith's role in the story is to suture the racial and gendered discourses of colonial racial capitalism to the spatial and temporal project of lasting settlement against perversion with the promise that the house and structure of settlement remain, that it is still only the beginning of the story and not its end.

In writing about Indigenous futurities that survive the horrors settlers orchestrate through genocidal settlement, dispossessive land grabs, and Anthropocenic climate disasters, Dallas Hunt close reads Cree/Métis filmmaker Danis Goulet's 2013 short, "Wakening," as a text that projects an Indigenous futurity beyond those imagined by settlers. Centering the Cree cultural hero Weesageechak within a dystopian police state and urban occupation of Indian lands and where possession of lands is defined through strict statutes of legal citizenship rights, the film imagines possible forms of Indigenous storied resistance that could emerge when Weesageechak releases Weetigo from a dilapidated theatre in one of the few buildings that remain standing. "The occupiers, they tricked you Weetigo," Weesageechak tells it. "This is no palace. This is your prison. The occupiers are more feared that you are, Weetigo." The film ends when Weesageechak, leaving the theater not knowing if Weetigo has heard or understood, and finds

two occupation soldiers waiting. In the next scene, Weetigo appears behind them, and then, with sounds of them being torn apart bodily and then eaten, the camera centers Weesageechak's horrified, yet resolved, and ultimately pleased response. The film ends with the promise of Weetigo unleashed on the occupiers as Indigenous decolonial resurgence, upending settler appropriations of "wendigo" stories such as the one found in *Until Dawn* and reanimating the horror settlers experience with the thought colonialism's end as a counter-narrative of resistance. The film, Hunt suggests, resists "white settler fragility" and asks settler audiences to "sit with, or dwell in, these affective spaces, to engage with narratives that consider the possibility of one's disappearance—narratives that Indigenous peoples have had to deal with for a very long time."⁵⁴

One of the reasons I am convinced that Southeastern American Indians have particularly relevant insights into possibilities for just forms of decolonial action that can address the interdependencies of antiblack racism, Asian temporal and spatial perversions, and Indigenous dispossession is that we have always understood that the earth was never a world-for-us. And the horror that western philosophy experiences when it is confronted with the planetary world-without-us, was, rather, something that we understood as promise. Southeasterners have always known that we exist in a world-with-us, where humans and temporality are always in dynamic motion, spiraling through gravitational push-pulls that exist beyond cycles of life and death. We continually return, to ceremonial events, to mounds, to lands, and to each other as kin and family in the dynamic processes of renewal and in the hopes of deepening our understanding of the challenges that face us all.

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