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Erase and Replace: Indigenous Presence in Reel and Real Life (Episode 8)

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[00:00] *<<OtterPod theme music begins>>*

[00:04] **Cathy Hsu**
This is an episode of the OtterPod from CSU Monterey Bay.

Hey folks, my name is Cathy Hsu

[00:11] **Seryna Bonacorso**
And I'm Seryna Bonacorso

[00:12] **Cathy**
And we got our homegirl Alex Ramshaw doing the sound mixing

[00:18] *<<OtterPod theme music ends>>*

[00:20] **Seryna**
Settler societies strive to erase indigenous peoples -- from the land, from history, and even from popular culture. This erasure leads us to believe that indigenous societies are dying out, fading from the earth.

Science fiction, though, is often used as a mirror to show us something more real about ourselves. In today's episode, we explore how science fiction can be used to illuminate indigenous experiences and indigenous presence. We will also delve into a popular trope of sci-fi -- the apocalypse -- in two ways: how indigenous people have faced and continue to face the apocalypse, and the rejection of indigenous knowledge and ways of being when faced with our modern climate apocalypse.

[01:08] **Cathy**
But before we start, we would first like to acknowledge that none of us here identify as Indigenous, and our intention in this podcast is to not speak on

behalf of Indigenous people. Instead, our intention is to critically examine the ongoing erasure of Indigenous communities by settler society.

I would like to first begin this podcast by walking you through a short claymation film made by the Choctaw artist Steven Paul Judd called *Neil Discovers the Moon.*

[01:40] *<<Beep, then: "Houston, uh, Tranquility Base here. The Eagle has landed (Judd, 2015, 00:02).>>*

[01:46] **Cathy**
So the opening shot is of a scene we are all very familiar with. Neil Armstrong, the first human being to walk on the moon, plants the American flag on moon soil and delivers that famous line

[01:59] *<<"That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind." Loud breathing (Judd, 2015, 00:22).>>*

[02:08] **Cathy**
And then….something weird happens. A very small hand taps him on his leg!

[02:13] *<<Repeated tapping sound. Loud breathing. (Judd, 2015, 00:32).>>*

[02:15] **Cathy**
Armstrong turns around and there is this small, young, dark-skinned Indigenous girl right in front of him without a spacesuit on. She waves at him and then asks him

[02:27] *<<English translation of audio: "Do we have to move again (Judd, 2015, 00:39)?">>*

[02:30] **Cathy**

Which in English translates to: “Do we have to move again?” Armstrong looks directly at the camera as the scene fades to black and you hear him telling mission control

[02:41] *<<“Uh Houston, we have a problem (Judd, 2015, 00:46).”>>*

[02:43] **Seryna**

Wow.

[02:44] **Cathy**

Right? The entire film is 59 seconds long, and there’s so much to unpack. You could write a whole dissertation on this! I don’t even know where to start.

[02:55] **Seryna**

OK, let me start by asking you this. What did you make of the title of the film? It’s not Neil Walks on the Moon, it’s Neil *Discovers* the Moon.

[03:05] **Cathy**

I find the use of the verb “discovers” very interesting too, and I was initially confused when I first read the title. Because what is there to discover, you know? The title is absurd. We all know the moon exists.

<<laughs>>

There’s nothing to discover. But then I thought about Judd’s Choctaw heritage, and it got me thinking: Where else have you seen a group of people show up to land already occupied by other people and claim ownership of that land anyway? And then forcibly remove the people already living there.

[03:39] **Seryna**

Hmmm sounds suspiciously familiar. So you're talking about what all of the European settlers did in America, right?

[03:47] **Cathy**

Exactly.

[03:48] **Seryna**

That makes so much sense. Because the story we tell about the establishment of the United States is that settlers discovered this “vacant land”, or “*terra nullius*” [teh-ruh-nuh-lee-uhs], and decided to build a home here (Tully, 1994, 174). And this home, that these settlers built out of nothing, has now become this “shining city on a hill,” the greatest country in the world. At least, that’s the creation myth we tell ourselves.

[04:12] **Cathy**

And that’s just not true. That’s not what happened.

[04:15] **Seryna**

Right. I mean, it’s absolutely untrue that North America was this empty wasteland. So many indigenous nations were already living here when the settlers arrived.

[04:26] **Cathy**

And we didn’t like that they were living on the land we coveted, so we invented these justifications that oh, they’re not using the land right, they don’t fit our Eurocentric definition of a sovereign nation, they’re not White so this isn’t really their land.

[04:42] **Seryna**

It’s so interesting that at the end of the film Armstrong tells mission control that they’ve got a problem. He’s calling the girl a problem, “[a]n Indian problem”, and the only way for Armstrong to resolve that problem and

become the first human being on the moon is if he and the United States eliminate the native (Fight, 2019, 4; Wolfe, 1999). After all, you can't discover something if there are already people living there. Unless you remove, erase, and eliminate them so you can settle there instead. Which is what we, the United States, did.

[05:13] **Cathy**

I think that's what Judd is trying to get us to think about. Because even though his film is ostensibly an alternative history about the moon landing, what it's really trying to do is show us that what happened in the film isn't an isolated event. It's a historical record of settler colonialism, of the displacement and erasure of Indigenous people by settlers. Me, you, us, we're the settlers and we keep on driving them further and further away from their homes until we've driven them all the way to the moon. And we won't leave them alone even then!

[05:50] **Seryna**

The film was so unsettling. It was just a conversation between two people but it was .. creepy.

[05:57] **Cathy**

I agree, and I think that was the point. Darren Edward Lone Fight, who belongs to the Mandan [Man-dan], Hidatsa [Huh-dat-suh], and Arikara [Uh-ruh-kaa-ruh] Nation, calls this type of indigenous art quote "an "unsettlement" within settler-colonial cognition" end quote (Fight, 2019, 19). This unsettlement happens when Indigenous artists impose their presence in unexpected places, places that were not created for Indigenous people. And the purpose of this imposition of Indigenous presence into US pop culture is to reveal the violence behind these ideological structures that continue to uphold the erasure of Indigenous people.

And Judd's rework of Star Wars iconography unsettles the dominant cultural narrative in the U.S. as to who the heroes are and who the villains are.

I don’t know if you caught this but did you know that the breathing you hear from the astronaut is actually Darth Vader breathing?

[06:57] **Seryna**

No way! How is Neil Armstrong, an American hero, in any way connected to Darth Vader, a villain from Star Wars?

[07:06] **Cathy**

I think this subversion of expectations is what makes this so impactful. Because if Armstrong’s breathing is Darth Vader breathing, then who is the hero, who is the villain? Because Armstrong is us, an American, an American hero. But if he’s Darth Vader, then he’s not the hero anymore, he’s not Luke Skywalker, he’s the villain.

[07:31] **Seryna**

So what does that make us? Are we the villains? Are we the evil empire?

[07:37] **Cathy**

Pretty anxiety-inducing, huh?

[07:39] **Seryna**

Yeah, it is. As citizens of the United States, we've mythologized this nation to be the "land of the free." We were the rebel forces fighting against the British Empire and now we're the "leader of the free world." And Judd is reminding us that we're not the people we think we are. That this story we tell ourselves is a lie, a lie to hide the crimes we've committed against Native Americans.

[08:05] **Cathy**

Judd’s unsettling the settler.

[08:07] **Seryna**

Ah, that’s a good way to put it.

[08:10] **Cathy**

You know what my favorite moment in the film was? When the girl replied to Armstrong not in English but in her native language. Because the fact that she is speaking in an Indigenous language goes to show that despite centuries of linguistic repression, the United States has failed to wipe her language and culture out of existence. That despite centuries of persecution and elimination Indigenous people are still here. They are still standing. And just when we think we've gotten rid of them, they pop up in the most unexpected places -- like the moon(!) -- to remind us that yes, they are still here, a living and breathing reminder of our failure to wipe them out of existence. We've failed to eliminate the problem. (Fight, 2019).

[08:59] **Seryna**

That's right, it *has* failed—mission incomplete!

[09:00] **Cathy**

<<*laughs*>> Good pun, you got me there.

[09:02] **Seryna**

And speaking of the apocalypse <<*jarring sound*>> let's unpack that idea a little bit more. When we think of the apocalypse, particularly in the context of science fiction, our minds often go to crazy and unrealistic scenarios because those are what we imagine to be capable of destroying life as we know it.

[09:22] **Cathy**

Yeah! <<*spooky, apocalypse sound throughout next sentence*>> We imagine a fictional apocalypse; our minds turn to zombie outbreaks, alien invasions, dystopian governments, or natural disasters capable of taking out cities at a time by sheer force.

[09:37] **Seryna**

You're exactly right, and in this part of the episode I'd like for us to delve into real-life apocalypses. Specifically, we'll be discussing the apocalypse that Indigenous peoples have had to continually face due to the logic of elimination of settler colonial states. We'll tie that to the climate related apocalypse that earth is currently facing, and the erasure of Indigenous peoples and their knowledge systems as we navigate and mitigate climate change.

[10:10] **Cathy**

Which is quite strange when you think about it, especially when considering that Indigenous communities have historically had the closest relationships with the land and therefore have known how to adapt to its changes. These communities have survived through a lot.

[10:26] **Seryna**

Yeah, so the settler colonial state has essentially failed in its apocalyptic mission to erase Indigenous peoples, but we have to talk about that "apocalyptic mission."

[10:39] **Cathy**

Right, it *was* an apocalypse. These communities have experienced an end to life as they knew it. Indigenous connection to the land is of the utmost importance, but that precious land was stolen, and those peoples were pushed away and forced to comply with the demands of the settlers. Today, they continue to push back against the aftermath of this "apocalypse", but the effects of it aren't going away anytime soon.

[11:09] **Seryna**

You're right, and they still haven't been given their land back. Also, Indigenous peoples face a huge lack of representation within larger society. However, despite all of this, these communities still exist! Which is amazing considering that they *have* been through an ongoing apocalypse. But the

point I'm trying to make here through all of this is that *Indigeous peoples continue to survive an apocalypse driven by settler colonization*. And right now, the entire world is experiencing an apocalypse driven by climate change.

[11:41] **Cathy**

In a way, our capitalist-driven climate crisis comes from the same type of greed that led to the apocalypse that Indigenous peoples face, by means of the settler colonial state. As we know, the settler colonial state is best buddies with the capitalist system; settler colonialism is the logic and capitalism is the weapon. Capitalism has been weaponized by the settler project to accumulate Indigenous land for profit and private property (Simpson, 2017). They really have a lot of connections, and they really seem to like causing apocalypses.

[12:18] **Seryna**

I agree, and I'm glad you emphasized that connection. Let's just say, that if the settler colonial state and capitalism were in the same lunchroom, they'd be sitting together and gossiping the whole time—which would probably take place *after* they've stolen someone else's lunch money.

[12:36] **Cathy**

It's tragic that high school never ends for some people.

[12:39] **Seryna**

<<*laughs*>> Now, let's tie this all together in a neat little bow—and by little bow I mean a great article written by an Indigenous scholar. So, I'd like to bring our attention to Kyle Whyte, who is a member of the Citizen Potawatomi [Pow-tuh-waa-tuh-mee] Nation. The article, titled "Indigenous science (fiction) for the Anthropocene: Ancestral dystopias and fantasies of climate change crises," covers the apocalypse that Indigenous peoples have had to survive through, as well as the significance of acknowledging Indigenous approaches to our climate crisis.

[13:19] **Cathy**

Well, we've discussed how Indigenous communities survive through the apocalyptic settler logic of elimination, but what about Indigenous involvement in the climate crisis? That's not something that I think most people have considered before, which can certainly attest to the idea that Indigenous peoples are left out of and erased from global climate discourse and perspectives.

[13:43] **Seryna**

Yeah! And as much as I'd love to explore all the topics that Whyte discusses, we're gonna keep things short and stick to a simplified version of exactly that! To preface our next topic, I'll have Cathy briefly explain epochs.

[13:57] **Cathy**

Sure thing. So, according to *National Geographic*, we are technically still living in the Holocene in regards to it being our current proven epoch—epoch meaning a section of earth's history *geologically* speaking. Although it is not formally recognized, many scientists consider us to be in a new epoch due to the impacts that human activity and industrial development have had on the earth. This new epoch is referred to as the Anthropocene and is commonly associated with climate change (National Geographic Society).

[14:26] **Seryna**

Whyte notes that Indigenous peoples are often seen, in historical climate related contexts, as simply being a part of the Holocene. The lack of Indigenous existence within literature and history regarding the Anthropocene only perpetuates the idea that Indigenous communities are going extinct or that they only exist in the past. Whyte states that to him, quote: "it seems like that just as the Anthropocene is emerging as a concept and climate change is taken seriously as an issue, Indigenous peoples are already categorized into narratives and conceptions of time that we did not and would not choose," end quote (Whyte 2018, 234).

[15:11] **Cathy**

It seems like the first logical step here is to actually acknowledge Indigenous communities within the Anthropocene. How could we possibly be allies to Indigenous peoples if we can't even acknowledge their existence?

[15:25] **Seryna**

Yeah! Also, many Indigenous communities do not view climate change through the same lens as other communities, and their perspective and lived experiences could be beneficial to navigating climate change. Whyte recognizes that, quote: "the hardships that many nonIndigenous people dread most of the climate crisis are ones that Indigenous peoples have endured already due to different forms of colonialism: economic collapse, species loss, economic crash, drastic relocation, and cultural disintegration," end quote (Whyte 2018, 226). Many Indigenous scholars see this as another era of forced adaptation, which their communities have persisted through on numerous occasions.

[16:08] **Cathy**

I love the last point you made. This makes so much sense! In order to address our current climate apocalypse, we *need* to acknowledge the communities who know the most about how to adapt and work through an apocalypse. *Of course* Indigeous knowledge should be an essential part of climate change discourse and societal solutions.

[16:30] **Seryna**

It really makes sense when you actually broaden your idea of what an apocalypse is and who knows how to survive one.

[16:39] *<<Unsettling music begins>>*

[16:40] **Cathy**

Whether we're talking about fictional works

[16:43] **Seryna**

Or real life situations

[16:45] **Cathy**

There is an ongoing erasure of Indigenous people. We settlers continue to perpetuate the myth that contemporary Indigenous communities are the last of a dying race, that they are the last vestiges of a people without a future.

[17:01] **Seryna**

And that is a lie. These communities are a testimony to the strength and vibrance of Indigenous existence, knowledge, and culture. We must respect and appreciate these communities, and we must recognize their knowledge and the power it holds.

[17:18] *<<Unsettling music stops.>>*

[17:21] *<<OtterPod theme music begins>>*

[17:26] **Cathy**

Executive producers of the OtterPod are Dr. Sara Salazar Hughes and Liz Zepeda; the Editorial Board also includes Dr. Chrissy Lau. Theme music by Eric Mabrey [May-bree]. Research by Seryna Bonacorso, Cathy Hsu, and Alex Ramshaw, script writing and hosting by Hsu and Bonacorso, and sound mixing by Ramshaw.

[17:52] **Seryna**

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<<OtterPod theme music fades out>>

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