



INDIGENOUS BURIAL SPACES IN MEDIA: Views of Mi'gmaq Cemeteries as Sites of Horror and the Sacred

*And when the last Red Man shall have perished,
and the memory of my tribe shall have become
a myth among the White Men, these shores will
swarm with the invisible dead of my tribe, and when
your children's children think themselves alone
in the field, the store, the shop, upon the highway,
or in the silence of the pathless woods, they will
not be alone.*

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The above quote is often dubiously attributed to Chief Si'ahl. Whether or not the nineteenth-century Suquamish and Duamish leader ever actually said these words, their persistent inclusion within his canon is part of an early and ongoing American fascination with Indigenous hauntings. Since Contact, Western consciousness has been fascinated with concept of ghostly Natives tied to haunted burial spaces. This fascination has resulted in one of the horror genre's most enduring settings: the "ancient Indian burial ground." This horror trope persists because of how much cultural work it performs. While not directly acknowledging the inhumanity of the settler colonial project, the cause of so many deaths resulting in the need for post-mortem internments, the ancient Indian burial ground situates Native communities firmly in the past, away from American modernity, and envisions Indigeneity as a malicious presence, capable of causing great harm from some unknown and mystical realm. Mainstream social consciousness permits the loss of Indigenous lives through dehumanizing a cultural Other positioned as evil.

The trope and its generic placement in the gothic and horror genres seems to have origins in Philip Freneau's 1787 poem "The Indian Burying Ground." In the poem, Freneau marks the differences between Anglo and Indigenous spirits in death, comparing the "eternal sleep" of Anglos to the "[a]ctivity, that knows no rest" the speaker observes in the "ancients of these lands" (lines 4, 12, 5). Freneau's basic concept gained widespread acknowledgement in the mid- to late-twentieth century in narratives centered on spectral Natives terrorizing white suburbanites: *The Amityville Horror* book (1977),¹ Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980),² *The New Daughter* (2009), *Kadaicha: Stones of Death* (1988), *Scalps* (1983), *Silent Hill: Revelation* (2012), *Identity* (2003), *Demon Hole* (2017), and the *Pet Sematary* films (1989, 1992, 2019) to name a few. Now a cliché, critics regard the trope as a means of confronting various mainstream anxieties including the genocide of Indigenous people and the concepts of land ownership and development.

Indigenous media makers, however, suggest a differentiated use of the ancient Indian burial ground in many ways. Interestingly, Native and non-Native filmmakers set a similar scene when depicting burial spaces. They are almost always shot from above and filled with fog during the dusk or night. Ominous music plays. Typically, a lone character slowly approaches the space, building on audience fear as the character enters a dangerous space. Although Native and non-Native eyes may perceive Indigenous burial spaces in similar ways, the fear generated by these scenes indicates dissimilar historical memories. Indigenous media makers are not only more specific in their explorations of anti-Native policies that perpetuated genocide and cultural erasure; they examine ongoing trauma that is manifest in spaces sacred to individuals and communities in sustained textual engagements. These more integrated engagements situate these burial spaces within cultural contexts that show their value to the plot's Indigenous community.

1. The book has many film adaptations; while some include the Indian burial ground trope, others do not.

2. While Stephen King mentions "Indians" several times in his novel *The Shining* (1977), the Indian burial ground trope is not present; Kubrick added it to the plot in a single line.

Differentiated versions of Indigenous subjects are found throughout media depending on the media maker. Non-Indigenous depictions frequently depend on broad strokes and persistence of stereotypes, glossing over the cultural value in the burial space and cutting to the resultant carnage. Even in situations where tribal specificity is called for, few specific and accurate cultural details are employed. For instance, James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) incorporates little actual Mohican culture, depending more on the mainstream stereotype of "lasting"—to borrow Jean O'Brien's term³—Indigenous communities, a popular trope at the time of the novel's publication. Indigenous storytellers, however, craft narratives full of cultural details and nuance that lend credibility to themes and characters. Bifurcated levels of specificity lend to the very different readings of Indigenous burial spaces, conceptualizations of histories, and production and confrontation of fear and trauma found in Native and non-Native media. This essay explores two versions of Mi'gmaq burial sites in the mainstream *Pet Sematary* (1989) and the Mi'gmaq *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* (2013) as a means of highlighting the key distinctions in interpreting Indigenous burial spaces as sites of horror or as sacred spaces resultant of the level of plot integration and accurate cultural representation.

PET SEMATARY (1989)

While many mainstream interpretations of Indigenous burial spaces rely on vagaries, Stephen King's *Pet Sematary* (1983) takes another approach by frequently setting scenes in the maintained burial ground of a specific Native Nation: the Mi'gmaqs.⁴ Even still,

3. O'Brien's 2010 text, *Firsting and Lasting: Writing Indians out of Existence in New England*, posits that Mainstream colonial culture crafted cultural narratives which presented themselves as "first" settlers of the Indigenous lands they built on while suggesting that Indigenous populations were dying out, leaving certain individuals the "last" of their communities. Both ideas were, of course, myths, as Indigenous peoples populated New England well before contact and many lived among the colonial voices that suggested their disappearance.

4. Throughout this paper, I will use this spelling although many spellings of this American Indian/First Nations community are in use. My reason for choosing the spelling "Mi'gmaq" over "Micmac," "Mi'kmaq," "Mi'kmaw,"

the text and its eponymous adaptation directed by Mary Lambert (1989) both miss the opportunity to educate their audiences with concrete cultural elements, either by portraying contemporary land claim issues with sympathy, or by presenting first-person accounts from living Mi'gmaq characters. Although the narrative engages much more closely with the Mi'gmaqs than the average mainstream horror text featuring burial grounds, both the novel and film forms of *Pet Semetary* rely on fear-based stereotypes that damage the image of Indian Country and its people, specifically the Mi'gmaqs through appropriation of burial spaces and replacing a sacred context with one of fear.

Critically, the novel is considered one of King's best works. Of course, these critical remarks do not consider the negative portrayal of the Mi'gmaqs, especially those living in Maine, at a sensitive time of seeking federal recognition and making a joint claim for lost land with other tribes of the Wabanaki Confederacy. The Wabanaki Confederacy joins several Algonquian First Nations and American Indian Nations together to consolidate power and protect their mutual interests, namely land. The four principal members of the Confederacy are the Mi'gmaq, Maliseet, Passamaquoddy, and Penobscot Nations. The latter two groups along with the Houlton Band of Maliseet Indians were recognized in the 1980 Maine Indian Claims Settlement legislation; the Aroostook Band of Mi'gmaqs was recognized as a claimant in 1989 ("Maine Indian Claims Settlement"). King's reliance on stereotypes of Indigenous populations as mystical and relegated to the past (notably through the lack of contemporary Mi'gmaq characters and the continuation of their supposed practices divorced from their worldview by non-Native characters Jud and Louis) is especially damaging due to this timing. Less well received, the film has nonetheless exacerbated the damage done in the original text as a part of the mainstream cultural zeitgeist. Comedy Central's adult cartoon *South Park* has included the ancient Indian burial ground premise in several episodes and included an unmistakably

or any other is simply that this Nation's government in Canada—the setting of the film *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* representing Mi'gmaq views in this paper—frequently uses this spelling. It also appears in much of the literature surrounding the film.

Maine-accented character obviously based on *Pet Sematary's* Jud Crandall and actor Fred Gwynne's overstressing of the regional accent. The film even gained enough popularity and financial reward to warrant a sequel, also directed by Lambert, released in 1992. Ever since, *Pet Sematary* has been a cult classic, a point discussed in a 2017 documentary about the film, *Unearthed & Untold: The Path to Pet Sematary*. A prequel is currently in the works.

Critical and cultural acceptance aside, both novel and film retain much of the same plot. The narrative opens on the Creed family, Louis (Dale Midkiff) and Rachel (Denise Crosby) along with their children, young Ellie (Blaze Berdahl) and toddler Gage (Miko Hughes), en route from Chicago to rural Ludlow, Maine where Louis has recently accepted a position as a doctor on a small college campus. Upon arriving at their new home, neighbor Jud Crandall warns the Creeds about the dangerous road in front of their house where truck drivers are known to speed. He also takes them through the woods to a burial spot where generations of children have buried their pets, many of whom were victims of the road. He explains that the entire area used to be Mi'gmaq territory and land disputes are still underway in the courts. On his first day on the job, Louis struggles to keep a student, Victor Pascow (Brad Greenquist), alive after being hit by a car. As Victor succumbs to his injuries, Louis believes he hears the young man warn him about the cemetery. He subsequently has a nightmare in which Victor takes him to a natural boundary between the cemetery and the woods, warning Louis against crossing the border. Later, Ellie's cat, Church, is fatally hit by a truck, and Jud tells Louis that there is a way to bring the cat back to life. Behind the burial ground reserved for pets, past a wall of trees and woodland debris, an ancient Mi'gmaq burial ground with secret malevolent powers contains the ability to reanimate corpses buried there. Jud warns that things come back changed, and that "sometimes dead is better." The two men bury the cat who comes back to life but with an eerie presence and a destructive streak. While Ellie adjusts to her cat's unusual behavior, the family settles into a routine in Ludlow until Gage runs into the street and is hit by a speeding truck. After his funeral, Louis steals his son's body and reinters it in the Mi'gmaq space. Gage returns and kills Jud and Rachel. Louis is able to kill his undead

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cat and son, but distraught over the loss of his wife, he gives the Mi'gmaq burial ground one last try. The novel and film both end with Rachel's return and the suggestion that she kills Louis.

MI'GMAQ CULTURAL FACTS AND POST-CONTACT HISTORY

The Mi'gmaqs offered no input into King's or Lambert's projects, and it is unknown whether the author or director actively sought out culturally appropriate materials concerning the Mi'gmaqs while researching their projects. Keenly aware of process and writerly concerns, it is likely that King would have mentioned his research methods in an interview or in his book on Horror and his writing process, *Danse Macabre* (1981). Nonetheless, knowing more about the Mi'gmaqs, their cultural beliefs and practices, and the contemporary issues they faced around the release of the novel and film enriches an Indigenous Studies exploration of the *Pet Sematary* story.

The Mi'gmaqs are an Algonquian-speaking people of what is now the northeastern United States and southeastern Canada. Policies on both sides of the border forced the Mi'gmaqs to relocate to reservations, but Mi'gmaq culture can be found in the place names still used in their traditional homelands, for example Tatamagouche, Musquodoboit, Miminegash, and Miscouche (Davis 1991: 43). Aside from asserting the right to self-government, the Mi'gmaqs continue to engage in battles with settler colonial nations for "cultural, economic, social" sovereignties as well as over land rights (Hornborg 2001: 13). Many of their traditional lands are imbued with elements of the sacred. Locally, the hero figure Kluskap previously resided in a cave in Kluskap's Mountain, the point of his future return to earth. In the 1990s, Canadian Mi'gmaqs battled to keep the mountain from becoming the site of a superquarry (13). This is just one example of how Mi'gmaq cosmology effects readings of landscape, rendering it sacred. Differences in views of land between Mi'gmaqs and their colonizers prove problematic both in retention of sacred lands and in keeping lands where ancestors have been buried from being desecrated.

MI'GMAQ FUNERARY PRACTICES AND BURIAL GROUNDS

The burial ground in *Pet Sematary* may be no secret among the locals of Ludlow, but the Mi'gmaqs have a recorded history

of selecting secluded locations for their burial grounds. Secrecy of burial spaces is a priority to Mi'gmaqs who "fear some enemy should seek to disturb the bones of their dead" (Lescarbot 1991: 31). Ancestors' remains make burial spaces doubly sacred within Mi'gmaq cosmology, and the living are to protect the land and appease the ancestral spirits connected to it from outside disturbance. Indian Agent William Chearnley wrote an 1854 letter claiming that "desecration of their ancient burial grounds" was "a source of great annoyance" for Mi'gmaqs (1991: 252). Unwanted visitors are kept from disturbing gravesites chosen on "little island[s]" (Alexis 1991: 274) and/or deep in the wilderness. Chearnley's dismissive tone is a singular example in an expansive oeuvre of mainstream attempts to secularize the sacred components of Indigenous worldviews. Horror's Indian burial grounds are another.

Regardless of location, Mi'gmaq funerary practices are quite consistent and usually involve burial. One of the oldest excavation sites of a Mi'gmaq burial ground offers a glimpse into burial practices from at least 3,800 years ago (Davis 1991: 15). In 1971, the Archaeological Survey of Canada uncovered sixty graves representing two periods of time at the Cow Point site in New Brunswick (15). Similar sites have been found throughout Maine. In such sites, a body received either a "primary" or "secondary" burial. Primary burials occur when individuals die in warmer weather close to the burial ground and are marked by the remains being buried quickly after death, usually at the individual's full height and not in a fetal position. Secondary burials occur in colder weather or when a person dies further away from the burial site. Because the ground is frozen or a body must be transported long distances, the remains would be packaged in bundles that require a smaller digging surface or are easier to transport (Davis 1991: 15–16). In either case, the contents of graves were covered in red ochre. When bodies could not be buried for several months, they were well preserved (Ribault 1991: 177; Alexis 1991: 244–245).

In a few cases, practices other than burial have been cited. Among historians and archaeologists studying Mi'gmaq culture, cremation is considered "a unique fashion" of treating bodies (Davis 1991: 18). In these cases, remains were gathered and buried in graves (Davis 1991: 18–19). When cremating bodies, the entirety

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of the body's "flesh and bones were burned white, so that, when touched, they would fall apart" (Ginnish 1991: 153). In at least one case, a body was decorated for burial but was then placed "on its knees between two stakes, with another supporting it under the arms" (de Champlain 1991: 31). In another case, a sky burial was performed at an individual's request; according to legend, the individual then came back to life, sporting obvious physical proof of his death and exposure to the elements. In this curious situation, the individual was regarded as a magician (Rand 1991: 85).⁵

Typical Mi'gmaq practices are not depicted in *Pet Sematary*. It could be said that Mi'gmaq burials have included measures against reanimation; funerals for individuals possessing magical powers demand practices that ensure that the individual will not return to life. In cremations, this is one reason why bodies must be completely brought to the point of disintegration. For burials, stones might be placed on the grave to weigh down the body.⁶ The Mi'gmaq cemetery in *Pet Sematary* conversely contains graves carefully covered with stones, a practice that *ensures* a corpse returns to life. Jud insists that Louis, tired from digging Church's grave, add a small cairn atop the burial mound. Not knowing how exactly to go about the ritual, Jud tells him that "it's what [he thinks] that counts" (King 2001:175). Having completed the cairn, Louis reflects that "it looked right, somehow" (2001: 176). This narrative inclusion is either the product of misunderstanding Mi'gmaq practices or—more likely—an invention of King; the piling of rocks over graves seems a broadly mystical thing to do as does the unpracticed instinct that it has been done appropriately. In any other case aside from group suspicion of resurrection, burial grounds were even said to be "for the most part selected in spots *free from rocks*" (Chearnley 1991: 253; emphasis added). Despite the lack of rocks in traditional Mi'gmaq practice, King and Lambert depict an abundance of rocks with which characters make cairns.

5. It should be noted that cases of atypical burial practices come from non-Native records. Thus, the "eyewitness" accounts are suspect as the writers may be creating a salacious account for readers' amusement rather than documenting an event truthfully.

6. According to a Mi'gmaq worldview, some stones are themselves alive (see Whitehead 1988: 5).

While the extent and focus of King's research into Mi'gmaq practice prior to writing is unknown, if culturally appropriate research was completed, he picked and chose what elements he liked, repurposing sacred practice and images of sacred landscapes to mean something more sinister. Methodology *against* reanimation becomes a *means* of reanimation. If King is using the text to suggest "reciprocal consequences for those colonial characters that participate in the cycle of occluding Indigenous experience from the American consciousness" as Nathan Cleaver believes (2020: 32), he would not be living up to his own purported ideal through either inadequate learning—and thereby disregarding—or failure to honor Indigenous practices in his representation.

The landscape of Mi'gmaq burial grounds may have looked different than they appear in *Pet Sematary*, but they may have also inspired fear among early European settlers; post-Contact reports made by non-Natives claim that Mi'gmaq burial sites were regarded with a certain amount of fearful reverence by Mi'gmaqs. According to these records, once a spot became a place for burial, it was unsuitable for even brief settlement such as an overnight campsite (Piers 1991: 107; Hardy 1991: 214). In some cases, Mi'gmaqs would overcome desire to leave the dead in peace to bring food as gifts to spirits (James 1991: 318). However, these non-Native reporters may have been witnessing reverence for sacred lands and the deceased, not fear; ancestral spirits need undisturbed rest as they may need foodstuffs at times. Given the specific needs of Mi'gmaq ancestral spirits, it seems reasonable that one would not want these spaces unnecessarily invaded. However, the residents of Ludlow in *Pet Sematary* do not seem to understand the desire to leave sacred space un sullied just as they do not understand how or why it functions.

Respect for spirits and remains of the dead lies at the heart of Mi'gmaq "annoyance" over the desecration of their burial sites. In one case dating to the nineteenth century, the location of a burial ground was "desired [by settlers] as a site for a mill yard." When the Mi'gmaqs appealed the construction, a government representative made the claim that it was "expedient and even necessary for [the Mi'gmaqs] to give up their ground to the service of the white man, and that no desecration of the graves of their

ancestors was intended” (*Nova Scotian* 1991: 226–7). The Mi’gmaqs fought for their burial space then as they have continued to battle over lands taken by various countries’ states and provinces since.

Although not exclusively burial grounds, Mi’gmaq peoples on both sides of the US-Canada border have fought for the reincorporation of their traditional lands to their supervision. Specific to *Pet Semetary*, the Maine Indian Land Claims Case would have been known to King at the time of his writing during which the case remained unresolved; since “the Micmac Indians were much in the news [...] headlines [concerning the Maine Indian Claims Settlement] were definitely on King’s mind when he wrote *Pet Semetary*” (Hendrix 2013). As previously mentioned, the case included the Mi’gmaqs as well as other Wabanaki Confederacy Nations filing for the repatriation of land under Maine’s jurisdiction via the Indian Claims Commission which seeks to hear Native Nations’ claims for lands lost through unclear treaty language. The case:

was exceedingly complex and had tremendous social, legal, and economic implications for the State of Maine and its citizens. The claim covered 60% of the State with 350,000 people living in the disputed area. After four years of negotiations, the Maine Indian Claims Settlement Agreement of 1980 was reached. With the tribes receiving \$81.5 million, this was the largest settlement of its kind in the country and the first to include provisions for the reacquisition of land. (Passamaquoddy, par. 1)

Ultimately, a 1794 treaty between the State of Maine and the Passamaquoddy peoples (including the Mi’gmaqs) was determined to be illegal, but due to the land’s current use by non-Native factions, money was given instead of the lands being returned to their Indigenous populations (Passamaquoddy, par. 51). The case included no small amount of scandal, including the Governor’s interference by persuading the “Congressional Delegation to ask Congress to pass legislation that would bar the Passamaquoddy Tribe and Penobscot Indian Nation from continuing in court by retroactively approving the treaties that their claims were based on” (Passamaquoddy, par. 57). A cash settlement was bittersweet for the Passamaquoddy groups involved. On one hand, the case’s outcome upheld the idea of Native sovereignty and rights to their traditional land bases, dodging the European notions of the “Doc-

trine of Discovery” and Conquest usually sustained in land claims; on the other hand, the land itself remains lost to the Mi’gmaqs and their co-plaintiffs, and questions about the monetary value of lands with deep cultural, political, and spiritual significance loom large. In King’s work, Jud is clearly a Maine citizen unwilling to see an Indigenous point of view concerning the lands involved in the case. A place that would be seen as sacred and revered to the land’s original inhabitants becomes a representative for colonists’ views of the Indigenous population: unstable and dangerous.

LAMBERT’S VISUAL *PET SEMATARY*

King’s *Pet Sematary* makes literal and figurative ghosts of the Mi’gmaqs who are either dead and buried or absent from the narrative so that they might attend to their court case. Both ghostings recall the vanishing Indian stereotype popularized through texts like *The Last of the Mohicans* in which Native peoples are purported to be heading toward extinction. In *The National Uncanny: Indian Ghosts and American Subjects*, Renée L. Bergland explores the frequency with which Euro-American literatures include Indigenous ghosts. In her conclusion, Bergland confronts *Pet Sematary*:

By creating fantastic Native American demons, *Pet Sematary* makes its readers and viewers forget about Native American people and politics [...] Most Americans remember King’s story. Most have forgotten that the Penobscot and Passamaquoddy tribes won their lands claims. This work of forgetting is accomplished by means of describing an Algonquian ghost so compelling it wipes the reality of living Penobscot and Passamaquoddy people from the nationalist imaginary. (167)

Indeed, “the Micmacs of *Pet Sematary* have no history worth mentioning; their presence is inscribed on the land merely through their potentially devilish rituals and their graves” (Mackenthun 1998: 102). Furthermore, Jud suggests that the evil of the place “may actually have been caused by the Micmacs themselves” (1998: 102). Without a living Mi’gmaq presence in the text, the mystery of Native cultural workings and the original purpose of the burial space takes a backseat to Louis’ familial struggles and interior dilemmas.

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A similar focus appears in Lambert's adaptation. She was initially attracted to the *Pet Sematary* project because there is "a *mysticism* in Stephen King's work that [she found] very appealing" (Singer 1998: 168; emphasis added). Critic Mark Browning sees the film as "basically a small-scale family drama with a supernatural element superimposed upon it" (2009: 91). A mainstream audience's view of this superimposition *creates* the "supernatural" element at the heart of the plot; divorced from actual Mi'gmaq customs and cosmology, the burial space is sinister instead of sacred.

Critically, the film received mostly negative reviews. Randy Pitman calls it "tasteless" and "an exceptionally poor adaptation of the effective Stephen King novel," and argues that "the interesting psychological portrait of a family coming to terms with death—which was at the center of King's novel—is completely jettisoned [in the film]" (1989: 116). He concludes his review, "Not recommended" (116). A *Variety* reviewer admits "word of mouth should send the film to the great beyond in a matter of weeks" (1989: 26). However, Philip Strick posits that is "much to the film's advantage [that] visual ambiguity replaces and enriches King's often strident vocabulary" (1989: 342). He goes on to compliment Lambert's directorial vision, saying that "the camera works more wonders than the [narrative]" even though the ultimate product is "frustratingly uneven" and "[suggests] more than it can deliver" (Strick 1989: 342).

Interestingly, official Mi'gmaq newspapers on both sides of the international border offered no direct response to the release of *Pet Sematary*. Tellingly, many cultural critics—both Indigenous and non-Indigenous—have explored the exploitative effects of the film rather than its qualities *as* a film. Kallie Hunchman focuses specifically on the questionable inclusion of the wendigo:⁷ "Severing the wendigo from its context allows Western authors to create a literary way of invoking spirituality and magic

7. The wendigo is an evil figure from Algonquian-speaking East Coast and Great Lakes American Indian and First Nations canons. Associated with hunger, greed, cold/winter, cannibalism, and murder, wendigoes range from being a non-physical spirit to a giant human sometimes with antlers. They can themselves cause violence or possess humans causing them to murder and cannibalize others.

by drawing on [Native stereotypes] created to 'other' Native American communities and create a marketable genre of Native American spirituality" (2020: 102). Without appropriate context, the wendigo becomes "simply a cannibalistic monster" (Hunchman 2020: 103), a one-dimensional figure presiding over an inherently evil landscape. Much more critical attention is given to the narrative as an exemplar of the problematic use of the Indian burial ground trope although the film never uses the phrase outright. Cultural historian Colin Dickey states that "for white people who drove the indigenous population of New England off their lands, it's a comforting counter narrative to be told that the land was so evil that the Wabanaki people didn't want it" (2019). In his book *Ghostland: An American History in Haunted Places*, Dickey troubles the colonial/capitalist "idea of home ownership—the Holy Grail of American middle-class life—[with] the idea that we don't, in fact, own the land we've just bought" (45). Confronting vengeful Indigenous ghosts "and expelling them[...] becomes a way of refighting the Indian Wars of past centuries" (2016: 45). In Dickey's "refighting," contemporary Indigenous presences are made spectral antagonists. This has obvious problems when Native Nations are embroiled in court cases against other governments for rights to land. Indigenous filmmaker Ariel Smith finds artistic flaws in the film's use of the trope. In "This Essay Was Not Built on an Ancient Indian Burial Ground," Smith asserts that *Pet Semetary*—like all narratives that rely on Indigenous burials to explain the supernatural horror—does not center the space in question: "this seemingly imperative story element is treated with little more than a few lines of exposition" (2022). Furthermore, Smith writes:

mainstream cinema's use of this trope engages a paradox by presenting Indigenous peoples as something to hold in fearful reverence but at the same time ignore. These films inform us that those who disturb burial grounds are doing wrong and are guaranteed to be met with gruesome and terrifying consequences, yet they sidestep the chance for a proper critique of our neo-colonial reality. (2022)

In essence, an Indigenous critique of the film matches that of the trope itself: inclusive conversations regarding cultural definitions of the sacred and land ownership do not need to include horror at the expense of colonized populations and their worldviews.

However, the film's use of the Indian burial ground stereotype does not fall far from the novel's precedent. The Indian burial ground's portrayal does not challenge stereotypes that present Native burial spaces as scary rather than sacred. In terms of camera work, the Mi'gmaq burial ground is shot in much the same way as the pet cemetery but grows more visually sinister as the film progresses. Viewers first see the pet cemetery from a high angle shot that makes the concentric circles of the animals' graves apparent in the opening credits. Later, as Pascow dies, he promises Louis, "I'll come to you" (00:19:01-00:19:17). That night, Louis wakes to a loud noise to find Pascow standing at the bedroom's doorway with his head wounds still present. He tells Louis, "We've got places to go[...]I want to help you because you tried to help me" (00:19:47-00:20:44). Although he appears and disappears spectrally through use of dissolving and double exposure, he is not presented spectrally, even clasping Louis on the shoulder, proof of his—at times—tangible presence. Pascow alludes to the fact that Louis is not dreaming and leads him to the pet cemetery. During Pascow's tour of the animal graveyard, he states that the deadfall boundary is not meant to be transgressed as a blue light radiates from between the tree branches. Viewers never see the light's source, but post-burial Church's eyes glow suggesting the light is manifest by an evil presence. Jud's introduction of the Mi'gmaq burial space is presented using the same high angle shot as the animal burial space. White stones form concentric circles that are sporadically interrupted by cairns made of white stone. Lines of tan stone disrupt the circles to form an overlaying design. Nothing seems unreal or supernatural about the space as Louis works to bury Church in the daylight with Jud's company. When Louis returns alone in the night with Gage's body, the scene becomes much more sinister. Fog disrupts Louis' path. He hears animalistic growls and monstrous laughs and sees a human face manifest from a bolder below him and call his name. Once Louis arrives in the burial ground, the camera follows his feet at ground level through the fog, highlighting his act of transgression into forbidden space. More fog enters from screen left as Louis places the last rock on Gage's cairn. At first, the pet cemetery seems like a calm, verdant place for children before Pascow's phosphorescent

warning. Likewise, the Mi'gmaq space is first presented as a quiet normative space before becoming a place of terror in the night.

The film does not interact appropriately with Mi'gmaq story. The text blames the wendigo for souring the land and reanimating corpses with evil spirits. The film has no such nameable scapegoat. Pascow only says, "The ground [...] is sour" (00:22:50–00:22:59), but no agent of souring is named. After Gage's funeral, Jud confesses that he might be responsible for Gage's death by introducing Louis to the secret Mi'gmaq space. The "place," he claims, may have caused Gage's death because "[Jud] introduced [Louis] to the power" (00:59:50–00:59:58). The power's exact nature remains mysterious. During Rachel's rush home from Chicago, Pascow's ghost—unseen by Rachael but visible to viewers—accompanies her, removing barriers along the way and explaining, "It's trying to stop you" (01:14:37–01:14:42). Again, there is no name for this "it." Unlike the text, the film relies on ghosts as the supernatural feature at play. Pascow returns as a ghost throughout the entire film, aiding different characters in different ways. Viewers don't see a depiction of Ellie's dream in which "pax cow" warns her that something terrible is happening in Maine, but she assures her mother that the warning was real and came from "a good ghost" (01:03:37–01:03:52). Trusting her daughter, Rachel leaves and has her own ghostly dream on her flight from Chicago in which her deceased sister Zelda tells her "Gage and I will get you for letting us die" (01:09:48–01:10:14). Clearly both good and bad ghosts appear to people in this world. Interestingly, the worst ghosts of all—the angry Indigenous ghosts—go unseen and unmentioned. Somehow, in a world filled with ghosts, nighttime cemetery tours, little girl's premonitions, and zombies, no one thinks to credit Mi'gmaq ghosts overtly for "the power" of the burial ground. Aside from the sinister burial space itself, the best viewers get in terms of physical Native representation or verbal recognition is a glowing light referred to as "it" and vague wendigo references.

It would be unreasonable to say that either the film or the text does positive cultural work in representing "Indian Country" despite their divergence in how Native subjects are (or are not) presented. Both rely on typical horror representations of non-White, non-Christians while asserting White, Christian beliefs and lifestyles.

Joe Nazzare sees the placement of Native Americans in horror as a philosophically expected phenomenon but problematic:

[T]he “natural supernaturalism” of Native American spirituality seems to accord well with the Romanticism of the horror genre which allows for the infusion/intrusion of the unworldly into the realm of everyday existence. Less positively, the Native American might be seen as just another variable to be plugged into horror’s xenophobic formula: establishing a monstrous Other which must be vanquished to preserve cultural order. (2000: 24)

Indeed, Paula Gunn Allen states that White culture sees “native spiritual life as a curious artifact” (Allen qtd. in Nazzare 2000: 29). While most “monster” stories elicit fear in audiences to be considered generic successes, the protagonists usually overcome the threat by a narrative’s conclusion. *Pet Semetary* is different. Both narrative forms end with the dissolution of the Creed family and suggest that only Ellie survives the family’s brush with Mi’gmaq culture. In this way, the burial ground “wins” over mainstream American culture by attacking its most pure and basic subcomponent: the nuclear family. Nevertheless, “*Pet Semetary* essentially confirms a Christian conception of the universe in which forces of good and evil war for possession of human souls and in which consciousness persists after physical dissolution” (Weinstock 2008: 47). Thus, the evil Native forces might come out victorious, but the thematic drive to affirm Christian worldviews is the conceptual winner in each narrative form. In the novel, Jud compares the cultural canons, establishing a dangerous “us versus them” rhetoric that is felt throughout the text. He also discloses the beliefs of an early-nineteenth century fur trapper who blended “proper” Christian and “pagan” Indigenous spiritual philosophies: he believed that “all Indians, no matter what tribe, belonged to one big tribe—that lost one of Israel the Bible talks about. He said all Indians were hellbound, but that their *magic* worked because they were Christians all the same, in some queer, damned way” (King 1983: 201-202; emphasis added). Jud’s conveyance of this belief displays similar thought to that of the book and film; non-Native eyes judge Natives as a singular group without diversity through a Christian lens and find them spiritually wanting. In a narrative where Natives are not granted autonomous roles, it is no wonder

that both text and film serve to Other and arraign Native peoples and cultures. Even in readings that suggest that King was aware of Mi'gmaq practices that prevent reanimation,⁸ the Creed family's use of the Mi'gmaq land to destroy itself points to a disintegration of the sacred value of burial lands to Indigenous peoples in favor of suggesting a lesson to would-be non-Indigenous landowners is highly appropriative.

While it is rare for a text produced for mainstream Americans to mention a specific Native Nation by name, King and Lambert's works use Mi'gmaq land to represent the Nation as aligned with evil powers devoid of sacred practice which demean their contemporary land claims. Incidentally, a prequel is currently in production. Early casting announcements indicate "[I]ndigenous actors taking prominent roles [which] may point to a deeper dive into the legend of the 'Indian burial ground'" by "[e]xploring the mythology" through a Mi'gmaq lens (Vespe 2021). Ideally, this newer work will showcase the burial space as meaningfully valuable to the tribal community and not culturally appropriated to invoke fear.

RHYMES FOR YOUNG GHOULS (2013)

Jeff Barnaby's *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* (2013), for which he also wrote the screenplay, edited, and constructed the score, combats stereotypes through his multidimensional female protagonist and suggests a methodology for healing from boarding schools and other historical traumas. However, it paints a bleak picture of twentieth-century "Indian Country" by refusing to shy away from topics like substance abuse among Indigenous populations. *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* also recommends violence as a means of healing from the negative personal/familial and colonial histories that impact the characters living on its fictional Red Crow Mi'gmaq Reservation in Canada. It does this in several key scenes placed in burial spaces, the contents of which demonstrate that community-wide historical trauma concerning boarding school children's deaths—and Indigenous deaths in general—can be confronted through violent actions to varying degrees of success

8. Again, there is no evidence that King was aware of this belief or if he did any culturally-specific research before embarking on the *Pet Semetary* project.

and are justified due to the community's experience of oppression. Furthermore, personal healing can come from fighting stereotypes through self-representation and art activism.

Obviously, Barnaby's goal is not to sugarcoat history or its contemporary ramifications; his films do not avoid graphic content or harsh messages. He has said "his goal is 'to present awful or beautiful things to people and have them deal with it,' the objective, he argues, of any good art" (Barnaby qtd. in Lempert 2014: 171). Thus, Barnaby unapologetically depicts the horrors experienced by residential school children including a truant officer's attempted rape of Aila, the film's main character, and a secret mass grave of children in the woods surrounding the school. These scenes are intensified by Barnaby's use of gothic film conventions, notably muted colors and eerie musical swells, that are absent from his depictions of the community's cemetery where Aila's mother is buried and her ghost appears. Not surprisingly, Barnaby frames the film's terrors within historical contexts; *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* opens with a passage from Canada's Indian Act which gave allowance to truant officers to "[use] as much force as the circumstance requires" (00:01:14–00:01:20) to take children between 5 and 16 into custody, a policy that made an unimaginable amount of child abuse both legal and systematic. Despite its harsh content and glorification of violence, the film has received acclaim, winning the award for the Best Canadian Feature Film at the 2013 Vancouver International Film Festival.

Rhymes for Young Ghouls begins in 1969, almost a decade before the body of the plot. Aila's father Joseph (Glen Gould) and mother Anna (Roseanne Supernault) are drinking and doing drugs in Burner's (Brandon Oakes) kitchen. Burner, Joseph's brother, steps outside to tell his young niece Aila and nephew Tyler local legends about the local residential school's ability to turn Mi'gmaq children into zombies. Joseph and Anna prepare to leave. In their drunken confusion, Anna backs up over her son, killing him. The next morning, young Aila wakes up to find that her mother hanged herself and her father is being arrested, having taken blame for Tyler's death. The plot then jumps to 1976. Fifteen-year-old Aila (Devery Jacobs) has built a successful business selling marijuana out of Burner's home. She gets her product from an elder, Ceres (Katherine

Sorby), who acts as Aila's proxy grandmother and cultural teacher. Newly released from prison, Joseph finds his adolescent daughter engaged in this questionable enterprise. Aila's profits go toward bribing the local truant officer, Popper (Mark Anthony Krupa), to allow her and her friends to remain free from St. Dymphna,⁹ the local residential boarding school. However, Popper steals this "truancy tax" from one of her friends but demands the tax still be paid. Backed into a corner, Aila and her young crew devise a plan to break into St. Dymphna's and reclaim the money. Anna's ghost offers support during Aila's visits to the Mi'gmaq cemetery. Popper becomes aware of the plan and enrolls Aila in the school. The plan is enacted, nevertheless, and Aila splits the money with her friends intending to run away before Popper can retaliate. Before she can leave, however, Popper finds and intends to rape Aila before her youngest accomplice Jujijj (Shako Mattawa Jacobs) shoots him. Joseph again takes the blame for a crime he did not commit and is arrested. Although free from Popper's sadistic rule, the film ends with the suggestion that more mayhem must be wrought before Aila and her community can rest easy as Jujijj asks her, "What do we do now, boss?" (01:22:22–01:22:24).

Rhymes for Young Ghouls' path toward healing is unclear. What *do* they need to do next? Rather than answer this question, the film postulates that violent action will be necessary for Aila and her friends no matter the issues being undertaken. Aila has had to grow up too quickly, but Burner suggests she has chosen her path, imbuing her with an autonomy that does not position her as a victim of trauma. This instead grants her the power to combat—and violently—those who might try to take advantage

9. Irish-born St. Dymphna performed miraculous cures against mental illness and is known as the patron saint of the insane (Kirsch). Several points from Dymphna's life parallel Aila's story. Aila is fifteen, the age at which Dymphna died. Both young women escaped unwanted sexual advances by a man with institutional power over them, in Dymphna's case, by her own father. Both find small groups of men/boys to fight with them. Finally, both have fathers who confront the death of a beloved wife in unproductive and unhealthy ways. For these commonalities, a place named for St. Dymphna seems an appropriate location for Aila's resistance against an institutional power that plagues her community. However, where Dymphna was martyred, Aila survives.

of her youth, gender, and Indigeneity. Her power gets channeled into violent action, a tactic the movie endorses for reducing trauma and colonization at a community level. Yet, several key scenes also promote art activism as a means of personal healing, combating stereotypes, and invigorating Indigenous storytelling. Aila's art and her choice to draw in the cemetery demonstrate that the film refuses to rely on tired stereotypes like the vanished Indian or the Indian burial ground when modern Native Americans can "paint" themselves.

BURIAL SPACES IN *RHYMES FOR YOUNG GHOULS*

Rhymes for Young Ghouls depicts two burial spaces, the local Mi'gmaq cemetery and a hidden mass grave of St. Dymphna's victims. Aila is very aware of the cemetery as her mother is buried there, and she visits the spot to speak with her mother, something she apparently has not done for some time before the film's narrative timeframe. Anna chides her daughter for not coming more often, and Aila replies that she doesn't need to come to the cemetery to see her mother (*Rhymes*[...]00:44:45–00:44:51). Indeed, the film landmarks another spot in the woods where Aila watches her younger self and her mother interacting, suggesting that memories of her mother are so prominent that Aila does not need any specific place for commemorating her life. Although she appears on screen with ghoulish, zombie make up, Anna's ghost is not depicted as "spooky." If Anna represents all of Burner's zombies crafted by colonial rule, very little aside from a ghostly pallor separates the Indigenous zombies from the living Mi'gmaq characters. Anna offers Aila motherly advice and listens to her problems. The burial ground, too, is serene as opposed to frightening. The cemetery is in a quiet clearing deep in the woods among birch trees. Several dozen white crosses mark the graves of the community's suicide victims. The undisturbed land is covered in fallen leaves, making it difficult to tell newer graves from older ones. Barnaby avoids standard filmic conventions such as eerie or suspenseful music, fog machines, or nightscapes in scenes set in the burial space. The final product is a sacred place of comfort where Aila can commune directly with her dead mother and briefly escape the chaos of her life; the cemetery provides a respite from colonial patriar-

chy as a sacred Mi'gmaq space not just removed from Popper's power but one where there are no boundaries between the living and the dead, an Indigenous girl and her mother.

The cemetery does appear "spooky" in one of Aila's dreams, however. This dream relies on the cultural capital of the Indian burial ground stereotype by adhering to horror conventions: eerie music, a nightcape, fog, and a zombie struggling out of her grave. In this scene, Anna walks up to Aila, grabs her, and says the Mi'gmaq word for vengeance. Of course, the Indigenous ghosts of mainstream media are violently bent on vengeance in retaliation for unspoken historical crimes against Indigenous communities. However, enough scenes take place in reality rather than in dreams which depict the cemetery as peaceful that the inclusion of this scene should be read more as foreshadowing of Aila's eventual violent assault on St. Dymphna's than justification of a stereotype.

The mass grave in the woods directly opposes the calm tone of the cemetery although both speak to traumas experienced by Natives, the former through the sheer number of residential school victims unaccounted for and the later in its unsaid comment on the number of suicides committed in the small community. Yet, while Aila experiences personal comfort near her mother's grave, she expresses horror at the sight of the mass grave; juxtaposed, the two sites represent Mi'gmaq peace and colonial horror for Aila. In a dreamscape after being thrown into a solitary cell at St. Dymphna's, Aila follows the walking corpse of her younger brother into the woods. A choral arrangement, "O vos Omnes," plays in the background, exacerbating the unsettling feeling introduced by Tyler's existence in the world of the living. Eventually Tyler points toward a massive hole in the ground. Aila steps forward and covers her mouth with both hands in grief and shock. In a long shot with a high angle, the mass grave that inspired Aila's reaction becomes visible: a large hole filled with the bodies of children (00:59:43–01:00:37). This scene, like Aila's dream encounter with her zombie mother, relies upon mainstream horror conventions—the music, a ghostly presence, the darkness and fog, the display of a character's reaction before its cause, and the camera's distance and angle—and brings to light the tragic history of residential schools not some unspecified act against

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Indigenous populations. The mass grave is a physical manifestation of historical trauma (even though St. Dymphna's is a contemporary terror for the Mi'gmaq community) whereas Anna's burial space represents a more personal tragedy for a girl who lost her mother. In this way, Aila confronts the larger question of the sacred value of life and horrifying consequences of residential schools' colonial project at the secret mass grave and her personal loss at Anna's grave with a more peaceful aesthetic.

Aila takes advantage of the burial ground's physical and emotional serenity, turning it into a place where she can concentrate on her art. In one scene, Aila sits on her mother's gravesite drawing figures in a book (00:48:44–00:49:03). Her mother, the one who helped foster her artistic skills, also materializes during some of these graveside visits. Although Anna appears out of focus with ghoulish makeup, she is clearly not a frightening specter for her daughter, again highlighting the difference between stereotypical and self-represented Indigenous ghosts. The film itself performs an anti-stereotype activist function by its repurposing of Native burial spaces and ghosts much like that attempted by Anna and Aila within the narrative.

Anna's ghost confronts stereotypes in three ways. First, she is not a direct relic of past confrontations between colonizer and colonized, but of a specific family's trauma. Anna figuratively haunts Aila's present as a representative of the eventful night that saw Tyler's death and set Aila and her family on the path that would lead to her situation seven years later. Her drug use and consequent suicide are results of colonial suppression that fuel Aila's own intergenerational trauma, one of the more personal events that pain a girl from an historically traumatized community existing through colonial supervision and violent coercive attempts toward assimilation. Anna does not appear in the nightmares of non-Natives. Rather, she materializes to give her daughter comfort and support, to mitigate the trauma exacerbated by her death. Secondly, she acts to remind the audience of the continued presence of contemporary Native peoples outside of the context of relationships between Natives and non-Natives or colonial governments. Michelle H. Raheja states that in mainstream media:

Indian ghosts [...] are the uncanny, destabilizing sparks that flare up in the tension between vanishing Indian rhetoric and Indigenous resistance and self-representation. Native Americans are rendered harmless and unimportant through dominant discourses that treat Indigenous peoples as spectral entities, when they are treated at all. (2010: 107)

In horror, Native ghosts are a source of harm to non-Natives although they have been reduced to spectral presences that only impact the world through supernatural mayhem. By offering Aila support, Anna shows that dead Indigenous peoples are *positive* influences on the present, on the living and are therefore, in a way, still *active* agents that cannot be ignored. Her tangibility is highlighted by her appearance which is not lent a translucent quality through use of double exposure; she is as “real,”—as physically *present*—as Aila. Third, her art activism continues in Aila who resumes Anna’s work of using her artistic skill to confront stereotypical images.

Clearly, Anna’s presence beyond her death and the peaceful portrayal of the cemetery in which she is buried point to a divorce from standard Horror stereotypes. In mainstream film, both would be a source of terror for non-Native protagonists. In an Indigenous film, however, both offer calm for a Native protagonist. This may cause confusion in applying a generic label to *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*. For different viewers, it might be considered a Native gothic film, a heist movie, a revenge flick, or perhaps some combination of these. The film’s early mention of zombies and later reveal of the mass grave point to a horror film. It is at least this. *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* is a horror film that turns horror clichés on their head; instead of instigating terror through Native ghosts and graves, the fear in the narrative comes from the real presence of the residential school and the sadistic people that operate it. *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* addresses issues that often get relegated to textbooks. These issues are

brought to life by humanizing the victims of institutionalized violence and by giving the film’s characters a sense of agency: the characters depicted in *Rhymes* are not merely passive victims, but individuals with the agency to change the harsh realities of historical and generational trauma. The film’s writer and director [...] [shows] both the horrors as well as the resilience and resistance to them. Barnaby draws from an olio of classic Hollywood tropes and narrative devices, which

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he successfully amalgamates with indigenous storytelling, language, and history, allowing him to connect with Indian and non-Indian audiences. (Leal 2015: 384)

Thus, the film repurposes horror conventions for use in the process of decolonization, the same technique Aila uses in her artwork depicting Native imagery. *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* is a horror film *for* Natives rather than *about* Natives but also does the cultural work of offering violent revenge as means of overcoming oppressive colonial rule and art activism as a way to fight stereotyping. Both concepts hinge on the narrative importance of the film's burial spaces.

TRAUMA AND VENGEANCE

The cemetery where Anna is buried is more broadly used by the community than attributed to the boarding school. Viewers never see if the boarding school has its own institutional cemetery or if children merely go missing and are hidden in the mass pit. Thus, Aila's shaken expression can be read in multiple ways. She may feel shocked at the loss of human life that has gone unreported in her community and/or the callous disregard over the deaths of children. She is not completely unaware of the school's impact on her community's youth, as the crimes committed against St. Dymphna's students are casually commented upon throughout the film. These crimes are enough reason to spur her vengeance against the school's employees, but the reveal of the mass grave before she and her friends infiltrate the school credibly justifies their actions.

From the film's beginning, the residential school is portrayed as a known threat to the people living on the Red Crow Mi'gmaq Reserve. Burner tells young Aila and Tyler about the school's ability to turn its residents into zombies. The rest of the film offers tidbits on how this breakdown is accomplished. While laying out their plan to infiltrate St. Dymphna's, Aila's gang goes through the school staff's nightly "routine" which includes "[getting] their grope on" (*Rhymes* 00:42:52–00:42:54). The reference to the sexual abuse that happens at the school appears to be no secret in the community. Means of punishing students are also common knowledge, particularly "the hole," an unfurnished

cell meant for keeping students who misbehave in solitary confinement. However, the school administration seems to be aware of the harsh realities its students face by the way it establishes rules for incoming children, choosing to maintain control through fear. Popper tells a group of boys new to the school:

For you new boys, the rules are simple. You get caught out of your beds, you catch a beating and mend in isolation. You get caught talking to each other, you get beat. You get caught coughing, crying, sneezing, pissing, breathing too fucking loud, you get beat and put in isolation. Now, habitually fuck with these rules, you'll wind up on the hill. Oh, and from here on in, just the Queen's fucking English. Relish it. (*Rhymes* [...] 00:23:42-00:24:32)

It is unclear what is meant by “the hill.” Possibly, Popper is threatening that the children could wind up in the mass grave for an infraction as minor but as powerful as speaking in Mi'gmaq. Obviously, the people have reasonable desire for vengeance over the harms inflicted upon young children that can turn them into literal and figurative “zombies.”

St. Dymphna's regulations create a cruel academic culture, but the school's exterior and legacy provides a ghoulish figure felt throughout the reserve. It “is presented as a gothic-like dungeon that turns the indigenous peoples imprisoned there into zombies [and] is portrayed as towering over the Red Crow Reserve, darkening it in shadows of oppression and trauma” (Boo 2015: 205). For this reason, the entire reserve acts like:

an outdoor prison in which the Mi'gmaq are kept segregated and policed by the Indian Agent Popper with absolute power on the basis of those special laws and regulations [...] and where St. Dymphna's always looms as a violent threat that is empowered by the marriage of the mission of christianization and the policy of assimilation and enacted as subjugation and genocide of the Mi'gmaq. (Boo 2015: 205-206)

The film probes and problematizes the laws that create and protect the residential schools through Popper's explanation of the rules, showing the possible punishments for infractions via “the hole” and the mass grave, and presenting the negative outcomes of residential schools on students and their communities. St. Dymphna's presence as a colonial agent has dulled the Mi'gmaq landscape

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and crafted a reality in which its inhabitants seek solace through substance abuse. The only place where this cruel, oppressive sensation is not felt is the Mi'gmaq cemetery.

Rhymes for Young Ghouls does not hide the negative realities faced by modern Indian Country or their ties to residential/boarding schools:

Alcoholism, drug addiction, unemployment, violence and other social problems are portrayed as plaguing the indigenous as they struggle with the trauma of having been physically, mentally, emotionally, and sexually abused at St. Dymphna's and also been constantly bombarded with messages saying they do not matter because they are Indians (Boo 2015: 206).

The people of the Red Crow Reserve try any method available to forget what the school and its assimilative power have done to them as individuals and as a community. Meanwhile, the school building functions as a reminder of the punishments to be wrought for the "crime" of being Indigenous. In this way, St. Dymphna's "serves not only as a source of the soul wound, but also as a continuous perpetrator of the genocidal violence that refuses to allow the soul wound to heal and actually ensures that the soul wound is inherited generation after generation" (Boo 2015: 214). In the film's opening sequence, St. Dymphna's is visible in the distance as Burner tells Aila and Tyler about the zombies that the school produces (00:03:53–00:04:43). He is drunk and high during this exchange, tying his substance abuse to the abuses he suffered as a child at that school. As a victim of the school's violence against its Mi'gmaq student body—reified through the flashback sequence of Popper beating an adolescent Joseph (00:38:23–00:38:36)—his, Joseph's, and Anna's experiences and subsequent coping mechanisms effect Aila as a victim of historical and intergenerational trauma.

Interestingly, the film also uses the school's mission of Christian conversion as a means of critiquing Canada's residential school system and promoting violence as a means of exacting vengeance upon colonizers. After Aila is admitted into the school, her hair is cut short and her clothing ripped from her body by nuns. During this sequence, Popper reads Joseph a passage from the Bible in a voiceover: "Vengeance and retribution are mine. In due time, my enemy's foot will slip, for the day of their calamity is near

and the impending sorrows and ruination are falling fast upon them” (*Rhymes* 00:56:56–00:58:55). Immediately following this sequence, Aila is thrown in “the hole” where Tyler visits her and brings her (with her long hair renewed to her) to the mass grave. The ordering of these sequences promotes the use of Christian ideology of vengeance over one’s enemies against the colonizing enterprise of St. Dymphna’s that killed so many Mi’gmaq children.

The word “vengeance” recalls the dream in which Anna crawls out of her grave and grabs Aila’s hand, demanding vengeance (00:33:34–00:34:16). Her use of her Indigenous language supposes a Mi’gmaq methodology of dealing with St. Dymphna’s deadly impact on the reserve. However, the word choice as later used in Popper’s reading of Deuteronomy 32:35 endorses fighting fire with fire, matching the violence of St. Dymphna’s with violence from the community’s children. Popper, so intent to punish and murder his charges, is punished through being showered in fecal matter collected from reserve’s inhabitants and eventually killed. Deuteronomy 32:35 is a passage in which God explains to an aging Moses that He knows Moses’ people will forsake Him after his death, but He knows they will suffer for it. Considering this context and the film’s obvious dichotomy of Indigenous protagonists and white villains, Anna’s promotion of Mi’gmaq vengeance and her crew’s violent actions are both inevitable and encouraged ways of retaliating against the crimes committed against the school’s living and deceased victims.

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ART ACTIVISM IN *RHYMES FOR YOUNG GHOULS*

Rhymes for Young Ghouls suggests art activism as a means of combating stereotypes, promoting Indigenous female empowerment, and connecting contemporary Indigenous peoples with their cultural pasts. Several key scenes highlight the importance of art and creation to Aila although she never overtly expresses how meaningful she finds artistic endeavors. The film establishes that art allows her to critique mainstreams society’s views toward Indigeneity. Anna’s grave becomes a sacred place where Aila finds peace and can create and find meaning and value in her identity as a female Mi’gmaq artist. The Mi’gmaq burial ground and Anna’s

sketchbook similarly tie Aila to her familial past and issues of representation and cultural knowledge.

The film most overtly proposes art as an activist method for interrogating stereotypes in a key scene in which young Aila and Anna, wearing the gas mask that Aila dons throughout the film, paint a profile of a figure in full headdress on a piece of wood under cover of darkness. Aila questions this activity. As an explanation, Anna says that the headdress image is powerful and that while a “drawing of an Indian on some piece of wood isn’t a big deal, two Indians drawing it is. To some people, that’s scary. We could get into trouble for it” (*Rhymes* 01:13:41–01:16:10). Throughout the sequence, fifteen-year-old Aila watches in the background, giving a contemporaneity to the scene that she enacts through her continued practice in artistic undertakings near her mother’s grave. Beyond its sacred value to the community, the site’s value increases as a meeting place with her mother and a venue for practicing the activism Anna endorsed.

This exchange contains the most overt insistence of promoting art activism and nod toward the cultural work Barnaby’s film is meant to perform. Indeed, Aila’s questioning “[indicates] that Anna has taught Aila about their tribe’s culture and the importance of cultural specificity and sovereignty” and:

interrogates why Anna seems to be reproducing the homogenizing stereotype of the plains Indian in a headdress, the most common image used as mascots across North America by non-indigenous people when Anna knows better and should be resisting such inaccurate representations instead of participating in the replication, dissemination, and reinforcement of imagery that dehumanizes the indigenous and relegates them to an imagined past. Anna’s answers, “‘Cause there are some people who think it looks powerful,” and that that is “because they’re dumbasses,” indicates that Anna is knowingly utilizing the stereotypical association with the historically and culturally false image of “the White Man’s Indian.” (Boo 2015: 208)

An important lesson on maintaining an Indigenous identity in the face of stereotyping through art echoes Aila’s later choice to fight the violent means of assimilation at St. Dymphna’s through violence of her own. Art is not just a means of fighting the colonial gaze, but also gives Aila a means of connecting with Mi’gmaq culture and her mother. Significantly, she hones her

craft at Anna's graveside, a personal sacred space to practice a meaningful activity.

Aila is a complex young woman, at once quietly introspective and outwardly ferocious. Native media "is highly diverse and can in no way be reduced to mere protest writing alone, [and] the issues of persisting inequalities and the healing from historical trauma remain important topics in" Native media (Thom 2016: 200). Due to the intricacy of trauma and trauma studies, the multiple modalities of coping—even within a singular individual—becomes an understandable phenomenon. The solace Aila finds in drawing by her mother's grave and the power felt by attacking the residential school as the villain behind the mass grave paint her as a multidimensional character. However, only her violent actions are likely to inspire a cathartic release among some the film's Native audiences who would like to see the institutions that impact(ed) their own communities destroyed. In any event, the content and form of *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* live up to the film's tagline suggestion that "On the Red Crow Rez, growing up means getting even" by acknowledging a history within Indigenous communities that requires personal and communal retribution, perhaps most prominently in its centering on Anna's cemetery and the hidden mass grave.

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CONCLUSION

While non-Native films simply relegate Indigeneity to the past as a necessary part of colonial nation building, Indigenous views of burial spaces situate historical trauma in places where past hurts are confronted. Through examining the socio-cultural work of mainstream narratives like *Pet Sematary*, *Poltergeist II*, *Amityville Horror*, and *Identity*, a very clear message concerning the undesirability of Native physical or spiritual presences emerges from the Indian burial ground setting. Second-generation comedic treatments of mainstream Indian burial ground texts like *South Park*, *The Simpsons*, and *Family Guy* rely on audience awareness of horror texts but do nothing to critique their colonial views. However, in Indigenous texts like *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*, *Blood Quantum* (2019), *Imprint* (2007), and *Older Than America* (2008), Indigenous burial spaces and/or ghosts provide a clear message

of survivance and retribution in which characters are reminded of their culture's longevity and their people's ability to protect that culture from violent outside forces. It appears that the lens with which Indigenous burial spaces are viewed can demarcate them as either stereotypes or as sacrosanct, emblems of colonial discomfort or Indigenous resistance.

This dichotomous use of Indian burial grounds is likely to persist in generic ways across cultures. As horror has become a genre used for exposing and confronting social unease, mainstream mediamakers like King and Lambert rely on the genre's stereotypical tropes like ancient Indian burial grounds and cannibalistic tribes to confront (and ideally critique) colonization and genocide. Indigenous filmmakers like Barnaby caution less socially damaging implications of Indigenous figures by holding up a mirror to these tropes and the appropriative and stereotypical work they perform:

Horror cinema elicits a physical and psychological response by forcing the subconscious fears of the audience to the surface. This is why the genre can be such an effective vehicle for uncensored Indigenous expression, pushback and resistance. Horror cinema liberates [...] indigenous filmmakers by allowing [them] to not hold back on or censor [...] gruesome symbolism, [...] unflinchingly unpleasant allegorical representation of the abhorrent, repugnant, violent abomination that is colonization. (Smith 2014)

Barnaby, therefore, practices his own message as an artist working to turn stereotypes into powerful messages of resistance. *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*—like much Indigenous horror—meaningfully repositions the fear wrought from Indigenous burial spaces back onto colonial actions and spaces and replenishes the sacred value of Native spaces missing from stereotypes. The Mi'gmaq gravesite is the only space in the film untouched by colonization; the mass grave at the residential school is the direct result of it. With appropriate cultural contexts and meaningful incorporation into plots, Indigenous filmmakers like Barnaby decolonize Indian burial grounds, returning qualities of the sacred to them through story.

Barnaby and other Indigenous mediamakers are more likely to engage with the narrative value Indian burial grounds bring to their texts. While the quality and quantity of any research done

by King on Mi'gmaq beliefs is unknown, his silence on his research methods when he is otherwise very vocally engaged with writing as art and process is telling. *Pet Sematary's* reductive inclusion of reanimation and circular figures is like that of the burial space: appropriative and misunderstood. They are mere features in a plot that is much more focused on the dissolution of the Creed family by enemy forces beyond their comprehension. The very plot of *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*, however, hinges on the sacred significance of the burial spaces as sites of cultural expression, personal solace, and decolonizing actions. Without the value inherent in the two graves sites, Aila would not be nearly so inspired or equipped to defend her community. More than a glossed over plot element, the film's action becomes interlaced with the burial spaces Aila encounters.

Interestingly, the shots of the burial spaces are aesthetically and compositionally identical across media. Indigenous and mainstream mediamakers have agreed that the landscape of Indian burial grounds has a specific look within the genre despite very different cultural intentions in crafting a cause of horror. However, repositioning the ancient Indian burial ground as an Indigenous contextual space interrogates both the trope and the horror audiences are made to feel. Mainstream film relies on settler colonial myths of a mysterious and evil Indigenous landscape, whereas Indigenous film firmly roots itself in the terra firma of the recorded history of colonial violence. Reflecting on Barnaby's collective work upon his 2022 death, writer Logan Boese states, "[His] movies are Indigenous Horror because they tell stories that cannot be told by any other people. They touch on themes and make commentary unique to the experience of Natives dealing with generations of trauma" (2022). As such, the ancient Indian burial ground of collective cultural imaginations does not appear to be in danger of falling out of use. Rather, the multiple uses it can perform as a vague or specific reference to the history of the colonization of the Western world ensure its persistence. As Chief Si'ahl may or may not have suggested, colonial superpowers will never forget carnage against Indigenous populations. Indigenous filmmakers guarantee that we remember and acknowledge that the land has been made doubly sacred in their deaths.

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Abstract: The term “ancient Indian burial ground” holds bifurcated meaning for Indigenous and mainstream populations. What one group may respect as sacred ground where their ancestors rest, another sees the mystical –and frequently evil– site of forces beyond their knowledge influenced by an ethnic Other. This paper explores this dual labeling of North American Indigenous burial sites through media by looking at representations of Mi’gmaq burial gravesites. In director Jeff Barnaby’s 2013 *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*, main character Aila (Devery Jacobs) confronts two burial sites that turn the mainstream stereotype on its head: that of her mother which situates Indigenous burials in a contemporary context and that of a mass grave of children at her residential school which places malintent on settler colonial practices. The film highlights Indigenous ways of coping with these practices including violence, substance abuse, and art. Dissimilarly, *Pet Sematary’s* (1989) plot involves no Mi’gmaq representation but follows non-Indigenous Louis (Dale Midkiff) as he interacts with a stereotypical Indian burial ground imbued with evil, unknown magic that leads to the inevitable downfall of his entire family. Both films interestingly include zombies, and they portray Indigenous burial spaces similarly as shot from above and filled with fog. However, their conclusive statements placing the blame behind the horror are vastly different.

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