humanities

MDPI

Article

Attempted Indigenous Erasure and Frontier Gothic in *Arrival* (2016)

Bethany Jordan Webster-Parmentier

Institut of English and American Studies, Europa-Universität Flensburg, 24943 Flensburg, Germany; bethany.webster-parmentier@uni-flensburg.de

Abstract: In the process of adapting a written narrative for the silver screen, there is much that can be lost (or gained) in translation. *Arrival*, Denis Villeneuve's adaption of Ted Chiang's *Story of Your Life*, is no exception. Often analyzed as a work of science fiction, this article argues that understanding *Arrival* as a work of the frontier gothic renders the attempted erasure of Indigenous presence in the film visible. The frontier gothic elements of *Arrival*, most prominently the transformation of Chiang's protagonist, Louise, into a frontier hero(ine), and the looming Montana setting, both evoke and attempt to erase the Indigenous presence in this "frontier". As a frontier hero, Louise ultimately supersedes the aliens of *Arrival*, absorbing and appropriating their knowledge and language to save the world (and the superiority of the United States).

Keywords: Indigenous erasure; gothic; heroism; frontier gothic; captivity narrative

1. "A Movie about Aliens for People Who Don't Like Movies about Aliens"

In a review for *Time* magazine, Sam Lansky (2016) describes *Arrival* as "a movie about aliens for people who don't like movies about aliens". Directed by Denis Villeneuve, the film is based on Ted Chiang's 1998 novella, *Story of Your Life*. In the novella, linguist Louise Banks is recruited by the U.S. government to work as an interpreter between government officials and the newly arrived aliens, referred to as heptapods. *Arrival*'s producer and screenwriter, Eric Heisserer, has described the process of bringing the story to the silver screen as a "long, invisible war", one centering around the struggle of adapting such "cerebral" source material that includes extended discussions of linguistics and physics (qtd. in Lansky 2016). While one of the distinctions between *Arrival*'s source material and its filmic adaptation may be a reduction in ruminations over myriad physics puzzles and the nature of language, I focus on what I view as the two most significant changes made in the adaptation: the transplantation of the story onto the frontier, complete with its frontier hero, linguist Louise Banks. It is through these changes that the source material of *Story of Your Life* is transformed into a contemporary American Gothic film.

Although Louise, a linguistics professor living in the twenty-first century, never encounters the "Indians" which commonly populate frontier gothic narratives (Lloyd-Smith 2004, p. 44), this article will argue that they are nevertheless present and that their presence is made manifest through Louise's experiences and interactions with the heptapod "aliens". In the film, these potential alien "invaders" reflect Susana Loza's (2013) assertion that "[W]e are still re-enacting settler myths. The only difference is that we have displaced our desire and dread of the native onto the alien." (64). The displacement of such fears and imaginings is reflected in the timing of "[t]he original UFO event of 1896, [which] takes place in the historical moment of the end of American continental expansion" (Panay 2004, p. 207). This sighting, coinciding with Fredrick Jackson Turner's declaration of the "closing" of the frontier, indicates that the connection between frontier mythology, "Indian" removal, and alien invasion is not a twentieth or twenty-first century phenomenon, but has earlier roots which articulate an "anxiety [that] surrounds [. . .] the violation of 'safe'

Citation: Webster-Parmentier, Bethany Jordan. 2024. Attempted Indigenous Erasure and Frontier Gothic in *Arrival* (2016). *Humanities* 13: 29. https://doi.org/10.3390/h13010029

Received: 18 September 2023
Revised: 3 January 2024
Accepted: 19 January 2024
Published: 1 February 2024

space by the alien other is a very real condition of the experience of being an American, and that an omnipresent danger exists of abduction and captivity and even assimilation into an alien cultural realm" (208). The threats of "abduction", "captivity", and "assimilation" ascribed to alien invasion mirror the same threats associated with the "Indians" of the nineteenth-century gothic frontier. In order "to signal [their] triumph over the barbaric in a supposed distinction from the primitive", (Lloyd-Smith 2004, p. 44) the settler protagonists of these narratives (such as Charles Brocken Brown's *Edgar Huntly* or Robert Montgomery Bird's *Nick of the Woods*) are driven to kill the "Indians" they encounter.

Reading *Arrival* as an American gothic narrative illuminates the ways in which the settler compulsion to eliminate Indigenous presences re-emerges on a twenty-first-century gothic frontier. This elimination is attempted by invoking Indigenous ways of knowing without recognizing them as such, but labelling them as alien, and secondly, through the character of Louise, whose actions mirror those of Mary MacNeil's frontier hero. While both of these methods of elimination are seemingly furthered by the introduction of the reimagined frontier as the film's setting, the presence of such knowledges and Louise's fate after her encounters on this new frontier underscore that the erasure of Indigenous peoples, presences, and knowledges, was not only historically unsuccessful, but continues to be unsuccessful even in popular genres such as science fiction.

2. Indigenous Presence and Absence on *Arrival*'s Frontier

Story of Your Life, Ted Chiang's novella upon which *Arrival* was based, is not explicit about its setting, but the film places its frontier hero, Louise, deep in traditional Blackfeet homelands in what is currently known as Montana. In these spaces, which are shot using "colder" filters in contrast to the "warmer photographic filters [used] for the protagonist's intrusive visions" (Zanchi 2020, p. 1), the film version of Louise becomes increasingly isolated both physically and mentally; this isolation is reflected in Villeneuve's implementation of the colder filter. Unlike in the novella, she is unable to return home during her time at the military outpost, the return of the settler repressed in the form of forts gone by. She is surrounded by the frontier, which is portrayed as dark and menacing and, importantly, vacant. Reminiscent of the Hudson River School paintings of the nineteenth century, the landscape appears to be void of any forms of life, human or otherwise, aside from the looming alien spacecraft and approaching military vehicles.

The menacing nature of this imagined frontier does not remain hypothetical. In another marked deviation from the source material, one of the aliens, Abbott, is killed by soldiers who remain wary of the aliens and their intentions. These actions precipitate the aliens' departure as well as Louise's breakthrough with their language (this scene will be discussed in further detail in the next section). It is thus through violence that Louise finds renewal for U.S.-settler society, reflecting "the myth of regeneration through violence that founds, and still drives, American attitudes, policies, and actions" (MacNeil 2009, p. 68). Moreover, following the aliens' logic, Abbott's sacrifice was not only necessary to save humankind, but to save their own race in the future. Just as settler narratives of history (such as Andrew Jackson's remarks that Indigenous peoples would "melt away") repeatedly assert the axiomatic nature of U.S. history and the undeniability of settler progress (or manifest destiny), *Arrival* portrays Abbott's death as an inevitable event.

In the film's screenplay, Heisser describes the spacecraft as "ancient were it not hovering over the ground" (qtd. in Norris 2017, p. 114). This artistic choice is striking when considering the aliens as signifiers of the Indigenous peoples of the region. Their spacecraft is depicted as both ancient and modern, out-of-time and avantgarde. This juxtaposition combines the supposedly "ancient" knowledge of the aliens—primarily the way they conceive of time as cyclical rather than linear with cutting-edge technology. In doing so, the film further implies the alienness of such a combination. This "new" way of relating to space and time can only be conceived of as alien in origin, thus erasing the presence of such knowledges in North American and other parts of the world and, through this erasure, allowing for the appropriation of such knowledges both intra- and extradiegetically.

In his foreword to *Blackfoot Physics*, settler scholar F. David Peat (2002) recounts the questions he faced when using the word "science" in connection with Indigenous knowledges. These questions outline the stereotypes engrained in Western science: "Why do you use the term *science*? [. . .] Indigenous people have traditions, folklore, and mythology" (xii; emphasis in original). These stereotypes serve to solidify the Western belief that Indigenous knowledges are somehow "primitive": "Learned papers discuss the question of whether certain Native groups had 'advanced' to the early stages of monotheism, or if their talk of the Creator was merely a parroting of what the first missionaries had told them" (xii, xiii). Peat's observations dovetail with Grace L. Dillon's (2012) (Anishinaabe) assertion that "In contrast to the accelerating effect of techno-driven western scientific method, Indigenous scientific literacies represent practices used by Indigenous peoples over thousands of years to reenergize the natural environment while improving the interconnected relationships among all persons (animal, human, spirit, and even machine)" (7) and thus pre-date western concepts of "science".

As Peat explains, it is the obsession with "progress" of Western knowledge that precludes Indigenous knowledges from being considered scientific by the academy: "This is the inevitable conclusion within a worldview whose values are dominated by the need for progress, development, improvement, evolution, and the linear unfolding of time" (xiii). Although "the linear unfolding of time" is the final item of this list, it permeates the preceding items (indeed, undoing its very linearity in the process): "progress" implies moving beyond the past, and "improvement" implies future advancements, as does "evolution". At the center of this progress is a linear progression from past to present: a forward march through time. In her monograph *Encountering the Sovereign Other: Indigenous Science Fiction*, Miriam C. Brown Spiers (2021) echoes these assertions, stating that this "narrative of continuing progress is, after all, a core component of the Western belief in Enlightenment rationality" (xxxiv).

In the settler-colonial imaginary, as an interaction between Louise and Colonel Weber which is not part of the novella demonstrates, interactions between Indigenous peoples and settlers will always result in settler "superiority". In the film, Louise uses an anecdote about Captain Cook's misunderstanding of the word "kangaroo" to explain why she needs more time to parse the meanings of specific heptapod words (admitting afterwards, but only to Ian, that the story is a fabrication). Weber's response is the most overt usage of settler-colonial language in the film: "Remember what happened to the aborigines. A more advanced race nearly wiped them out". Weber's words encapsulate not only the unshakeable presumption of Western intellectual superiority, but also the U.S. government's fear that the heptapods will treat them in the same manner in which they have treated (and, in many respects, continue to treat) Indigenous peoples, framing the heptapods as a return of the settler-colonial repressed.

The naming of the heptapods in the film and their visualization further exemplify the Indigenous erasure that occurs in the film. Since humans are unable to speak the heptapod language, Ian suggests referring to them as Abbott and Costello, rather than their actual names. In naming the heptapods, Ian continues a history of the settler-colonial imposition of renaming geographical features, regions, and entire peoples in languages other than their own. Moreover, in the novella, the heptapods are dubbed "Flapper" and "Raspberry", names that have no specific human counterparts. The comedy duo Bud Abbott and Lou Costello, on the other hand, are the main characters in the short film *No Indians Please* (uploaded by Visnansky 2017) Taken from the feature-length *Ride 'em Cowboy*, in which the two men portray "peanut vendors at a traveling rodeo show [who] get in trouble with their boss and hide out on a railroad train heading west" (*Ride 'em Cowboy*), in the short film, the two men arrive in what is literally labelled as "the West", and Costello finds himself in trouble after having shot a souvenir arrow through the heart on a teepee (a heart is stitched on the side of the teepee). Throughout the short film, myriad stereotypes (an overly sexualized woman in the teepee, a stoic "Indian" awaiting the two men at the train station) serve to erase the cultural diversity and history of "the West" and replace them

with racist imagery. The film's title, *No Indians Please*, blatantly states its purpose: erasure. The names endowed upon *Arrival*'s aliens might thus initially appear innocuous, but they also harbor a history of settler-colonial racism that at first remains unseen. Moreover, the designation of this space as a non-specific "West", complete with "Indians" stripped of any tribal specificity, resonates with the Jeffersonian idea that "Indian land was [. . .] something beyond civilization that, upon being subsumed in and thereby expanding the American body, ceased to be Indian" (Treuer 2020, p. 359). In *Arrival*, though Turner's proverbial "frontier" has long-since "closed", the "beyondness" of the aliens is accentuated by their positioning in the former "frontier" of Montana. Their presence invokes the history of attempted Indigenous erasure in the region and the endurance of such presences. It is, after all, the durative nature of this presence that provides fertile ground for the return of the reimagined frontier hero.

3. Frontier Heroes and the American Gothic

Norris's (2017) article "Lovecraft and *Arrival*: The Quiet Apocalypse"[1] returns to the idea of *Arrival* as an atypical alien film, stating that "*Arrival* [. . .] is an alien invasion movie that entirely lacks an alien invasion" (111). In reading Louise as a frontier gothic hero, however, I would argue that rather than entirely "lacking an alien invasion", *Arrival* is the site of an alien invasion. Firstly, with Louise as a settler invader, appropriator, and agent of attempted Indigenous erasure in the mold of the frontier hero, and secondly, with the heptapods, their language, and their knowledge, as alien forces that change not only the course of Louise's life, but the fate of humankind.

Mary Denise MacNeil's (2009) monograph, *The Emergence of the American Frontier Hero: 1682–1826: Gender, Action, and Emotion*, begins by exploring the figure of the frontier hero in Mary Rowlandson's *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God, Together, with the Faithfulness of His promises Displayed; Being a Narrative of the Captivity and Restauration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* (1682). MacNeil sees in Rowlandson's text a frontier hero who is often overlooked due to her gender (66), but nevertheless serves as an important archetype for future frontier heroes, such as those in James Fenimore Cooper's novels. The defining features of MacNeil's frontier hero include the following: "the willingness to engage with the American wilderness and the native peoples of America at an intimate level in isolation from European American culture", "the ability to integrate aspects of Native American culture and attitudes into [their] personality and value system", and "the assertion of the 'I' as an authority in the face of social/cultural authority, such that the hero remains simultaneously autonomous from and valuable to the surrounding frontier culture" (7). Within these three features, tension emerges between these heroes' relationships to their home (predominately western) cultures and the Indigenous cultures with which they come into contact. If the "willingness to engage" helps facilitate the "ability to integrate aspects of Native American culture", this facilitation allows for the propagation of the settler-colonial project, in that the hero then returns to their home community with the new knowledge they have gained, a "boon"[2] that will help the community survive.

MacNeil argues that the primary boon Rowlandson brings back to her community, via the dissemination of her narrative, is a way forward in their interactions with the region's Indigenous populations. Rowlandson offers her community

> a solution to a problem within her Puritan culture: how to deal successfully with Native Americans when they have power, in such a way that violence is de-emphasized and cooperation is enhanced. During her captivity, Rowlandson experiments with methods of interacting with her captors and with methods of operating in their world. The result of these experiments is that Rowlandson develops both attitudes and methods for surviving within the particular requirements of the American wilderness and with its specific inhabitants.
>
> (32)

In this context, the settlers' survival is not an ambiguous or innocuous occurrence to the Indigenous peoples of the region (and beyond), nor is the cooptation of certain practices

indicative of adherence to Indigenous community-building practices or reciprocal ways of living. Furthermore, the "cooperation" MacNeil references masks ongoing settler violence. In an examination of John Gyles's captivity narrative and its influence on Anglo identity in the northeastern corner of what is currently the United States and the Canadian Atlantic provinces, Rachel Bryant (2016) identifies a

> troubling sense of understanding and mastery that is implicit in the process of indigenization—which is generally understood as the process of *becoming like* Indigenous peoples. Such theories imply, however indirectly [. . .] that the settlers have listened to Indigenous peoples, that they have understood what they heard, and that they have productively synthesized that understanding into a collective consciousness and cultural perspective.
>
> (p. 16; emphasis in original)

Although Bryant discusses identity-formation processes and Indigenous erasure specific to the Canadian Atlantic provinces, her observations complicate the concept of the frontier hero and its inherently exploitative, extractive, and violent nature; settler scholars in particular must be mindful of their own predilection to repackage the appropriation and erasure that are rife in such narratives as progress or adaptation. Such oversights and blind spots can be made visible through the figure of the "Indian ghost" at the heart of Renée L. Bergland's (2000) *National Uncanny*.

Bergland's study posits that in order to cope with settler-colonial guilt, U.S. American cultural production turned to the figure of the "Indian ghost", a figure whose presence "usually signals the positive development of white consciousness" (19): these hauntings are productive and conducive to confronting and absolving settler guilt. This supposed absolution, or rather, the desire to receive such absolution, is rooted in the "internaliz[ation of] both the colonization of Native Americans and the American stance against colonialism".[3] U.S. Americans "must simultaneously acknowledge the American horror and celebrate the American triumph" and these ghosts offer them precisely this opportunity (16). As Bergland explains, the prevalence of these ghosts in the U.S. American settler literature of the mid-nineteenth century, after Andrew Jackson's Address on Cherokee Removal, is a further indication of this process: "during this period American writers were obsessed with ghostly Native Americans more than ever, because both Indian Removal and literary nationalism were on their minds" (21). The question of this era is thus not only how to assuage settler guilt, but how to define or distinguish U.S. American literature from its progenitors—the figure of the "Indian ghost" provides answers to both questions. It forgives settlers their trespasses and makes room for the settlers themselves to claim indigeneity to the land currently known as the United States of America.

This resonates with MacNeil's observations about Rowlandson's "boon" and the possibility of adaptation that her narrative offered Puritan settlers. At the same time, what is missing from MacNeil's discussion is the act of erasure that Rowlandson's text and its subsequent propagation constitute. Rather than "adapting", the Puritans extract the knowledge that they need from accounts and experiences such as Rowlandson's, but do not alter their overall approach towards the original inhabitants of the land (or, indeed, the land itself) they have claimed as their own. Instead, this knowledge is used to ensure settler survival. In *Arrival*, linguist Louise Banks assumes the role of the frontier hero, acquiring the knowledge that is necessary to perpetuate the United States's exceptionalism as not only the "leader" of the free world, but the "savior" of the free world as well. Louise's actions, however, come at great personal costs. Her experiences of loss and transformation and their connection to *Arrival*'s plot, American gothic literature, and captivity narratives, will be illuminated in the following section.

4. Louise Banks: A Frontier Gothic Hero

The film opens on a black screen with Max Richter's string composition "On the Nature of Daylight" playing in the background.[4] After nearly twenty seconds elapse, the camera pans down to reveal a large, dark lake on which Louise resides. In what appears to

be an analepsis which will ultimately be revealed to have been a prolepsis, the next scene, with a warmer filter[5], shows Louise holding her infant daughter's hand at the hospital. When her daughter begins crying after having been taken by the nurse, Louise says "Ok, come back to me, come back to me", the same words she will utter by her daughter's bedside after she has succumbed to a rare disease. This dialogue stands in sharp contrast to that of the parallel scene in the novella: "Yes, that's her [. . .]. She's mine" (95). Her plea in the film, "Come back to me", cannot be fulfilled by her daughter aside from in Louise's memories of the past and the future; however, as Louise's response to her daughter's death in the film demonstrates, these interactions cannot replace the life they had together.

The subsequent opening scenes juxtapose Louise's life before and after Hannah's birth. Viewers first see Louise interact with her daughter, pretending to be an outlaw with "tickle guns" coming after her daughter, the sheriff. On this imaginary frontier of their own, Louise is smiling and playful, oscillating her voice in a manner she otherwise refrains from in the film, even when surprised or frightened. When the audience meets narrative-present Louise in the film, she is on her way to teach, oblivious to the news bulletins behind her. She arrives to a nearly empty lecture hall. Students have stayed home out of fear and to watch the news, and those who are present repeatedly receive messages from friends and family. Louise, on the other hand, receives no such notifications. She is, prior to the arrival of the heptapods and the arrival of her daughter, an isolated, somewhat melancholy academic. As Francesco Stichhi (2018) notes, she "appears dejected and apathetic: she teaches without enthusiasm and lives in complete isolation from other people" (52).

Louise's isolation continues in the film following her interactions with Colonel Weber, who asks her to translate part of a heptapod recording from the site in Montana. As previously discussed, the placement of the "shell" within Montana is another deviation from the source material. Chiang's novella brings a total of one-hundred and twelve heptapod spacecrafts to Earth, nine of which are located in the United States, whereas in *Arrival*, a mere twelve "shells", as they are referred to, make the journey to Earth. Of these twelve, only one is located within the United States—at the Montana site. The heptapod's selection criteria for landing sites is never made explicitly clear, but in the context of U.S. settler-colonial history, placing the shell in the misty mountains of Montana further draws upon the settler-colonial imaginary and its depictions of the "frontier". In the film, this setting is presented as vast and unpopulated, with the singular U.S. military outpost serving as the only sign of "civilization".

Louise's removal from her home to the frontier in the film thus provides another injection of the (American) gothic into the film. In his examination of captivity narratives and the American gothic, Matthew Sivils explains that most of these narratives follow the same "master plot": "the victim is torn from her home and undergoes a series of hardships, after which in some cases she returns home, forever transformed by the experience" (Sivils 2014, p. 88). Louise is never torn from her home in Chiang's novella; indeed, she returns home most nights. In the film, however, Louise is removed from her familiar surroundings in the dark of night.

This is once again reminiscent Rowlandson's narrative, which is separated into a series of "removes". According to Richard Slotkin, the "choice of the word *removes* and her use of this method of marking the passage of time reinforce the impression of captivity as an all-environing experience, a world in microcosm, complete even to having its own peculiar time-space relationships" (109; emphasis in original). "Removes", movements to different locations for varying amounts of time, divide Rowlandson's narrative—and Louise's experience with the heptapods. By immersing herself in their language in the isolation of the re-imagined frontier, Louise begins to view time as circular rather than linear.

Another important deviation from the novella that reshapes Louise into a frontier heroine is her experience with the heptapods' spacecraft. The film physically separates the realm of the heptapods and the realm of the humans in its reimagining of their spacecraft and Louise's experiences with and in this alien space. Contrary to the novella, entry into the "shell", which Chiang dubbed the "looking glass", requires Louise to don a hazmat suit,

undergo rigorous physical examination, and receive various inoculations against potential bacteria (microscopic alien invaders). Louise's discomfort and uncertainty are made explicit by her facial expressions in these scenes, whereas the novella version of Louise is merely required to walk into a tent in which the looking glass, "resembling a semicircular mirror over ten feet high and twenty feet across", is being kept (96). The looking glass itself does resemble the screen that Louise encounters in the film: "Once the looking glass was fully lit it resembled a life-size diorama of a semicircular room" (96). Louise's interactions with the looking glass and Abbott and Costello, however, vary considerably from those in the novella and solidify her as a frontier hero.

The differences in these interactions begin with the manner in which Louise travels to "meet" the heptapods. It is only after removing her protective gear that Louise is able to complete a "proper introduction" with the Abbott and Costello. As a frontier hero, one of Louise's key skills is "adaptation" to a foreign culture. Importantly, this adaptation occurs outside of the physical proximity of settler society: "In these border exchanges, the American frontier hero engages the American wilderness and the native peoples of America at an intimate level and isolation from European American society" (MacNeil 2009, p. 69). Louise's removal of her protective gear creates this missing intimacy with the heptapods. At the same time, the effect that these encounters have on Louise's perception of time reflects the transformative role of the "frontier" in U.S. American literature: "The encounter with the wilderness and the Indian is so central to American mythology that it continues to structure visions of metamorphosis and immolation of the self" (Mogen et al. 1993). In the case of a frontier hero such as Louise, this metamorphosis ultimately results in the acquisition of a boon for her community (in this case, the U.S. government).

After her first breakthrough with the introductions, she begins gathering basic nouns and verbs in the heptapods' written language, but her progress is too slow for the U.S. government, which becomes increasingly wary of the heptapods after China cuts off all communication with other governments following a message from the aliens that left them "spooked". This roughly coincides with a rogue attack on Abbott and Costello, perpetrated by Captain Marks, a soldier whose fears of the heptapods are stoked by far-right videos he watches online. After the attack, the shells, which are dark, oblong spacecrafts that emit no emissions and produce no registerable sound, move from a vertical orientation to a horizontal one. Prior to the attack, the shells floated upright, meaning their very tip was close enough to the ground that scientists and soldiers could be lifted up in a crane in order to enter them. In the wake of the attack, however, the shells reorient themselves, rendering them unable to be visited in the same way. Louise is convinced that the heptapods need reassurance after the attack and she walks to the shell unaccompanied, whereupon the heptapods send down a tube-like transport pod that returns her to the shell. This scene stands in sharp contrast to her initial encounter with the heptapods and the shell. As mentioned above, Louise and the others were initially required to wear PPE when entering the shell. Not only that, but in contrast to the novella, film Louise's journey to and entry into the shell are marked by her lack of agency and by her isolation. She is taken from her home in the night and flown to Montana, where she is poked and prodded, before being thrust up the shaft of the shell by soldiers she does not know. She is not in control of her own body in these scenes. When she returns after the attack, however, her agency and her function as a frontier hero come into sharper focus. She traverses the frontier by herself, she boards the pod herself, and she enters the space behind the glass wall in the shell without any PPE. In doing so, she traverses the reimagined frontier, dissolving the barrier between herself and the heptapods.

In her assessment of "Anglo-Protestant captivity narratives", Bryant asserts that "the participant and the commentator" of these stories "are divided by a kind of invisible wall—one that leaves some room for the articulation of Indigenous knowledge but not necessarily for understanding or for transformation" (7). This invisible wall manifests physically in *Arrival*. Destroyed by explosives that Captain Marks set and smuggled into the shell, the glass wall that once separated Louise from the heptapods has shattered and no longer

separates her from "understanding" or "transformation". As she enters the white haze of the shell, she breathes in the same air as Costello and her understanding is transformed by it. She is able to perceive of time as the heptapods do and she is able to read their written language (referred to as Heptapod B in the novella). While Louise does undergo a change in her thinking in the novella, this change is much less absolute: "Heptapod B was changing the way I though. [. . .] With Heptapod B, I was experiencing something just as foreign: my thoughts were becoming graphically coded. There were trancelike moments during the day when my thoughts weren't expressed with my internal voice; instead, I saw semagrams with my mind's eye, sprouting like frost on a windowpane" (Chiang 2002, p. 127). Heptapod B thus alters the way Louise perceives language, but she qualifies her heptapod skills, stating that "I know I don't experience reality the way a heptapod does. My mind was cast in the mold of human, sequential languages, and no amount of immersion in an alien language can completely reshape it. My worldview is an amalgam of human and heptapod" (140). In the novella, Louise thus remains unable to fully comprehend the heptapods' language, but in the film, Louise's language immersion does "reshape" her mind, completing her metamorphosis into a frontier hero who can perceive future events, save the world, and re-establish the United States's position as a superpower.

5. A Movie about Attempted Indigenous Erasure

Jodi Byrd (Chickasaw), in their exploration of Indigenous appropriations of popular genre conventions, draws attention to narratives such as Rowlandson's in this exact capacity: "In the Puritanical production of the captivity romance, Indian otherness circulates within the ungodly wilderness as an intimately mingled fetishized object of desire and terror that orients a world around the project of settler colonialism. To consume. To replace. To be" (Byrd 2014, "Red Dead" p. 348). The ease with which Louise learns the heptapod's language in the film allows her to "consume", "replace", and "be" the aliens. In the process, she renders Abbott (who has already been murdered) and Costello redundant—taking their place and returning with a "boon" to sustain (or reestablish) U.S. dominance on the world stage. She is "the front line of defense for (white) humanity" (Johnston Aelabouni 2020, p. 6). The boon Louise returns with is a "tool capable of resolving all dualisms, transcending time by allowing [humans] to perceive the present, past, and future as one, blurring any distinction between cause and effect" (Zanchi 2020, p. 15). Meghan Johnston Aelabouni (2020) has described Louise's boon in similar terms: "Louise gains life-giving knowledge and power through her connection with the heptapods [. . .] The films can also be read, then, not only as stories of the *annihilation* of one world, the world of white American empire, but perhaps also the birth and becoming—the *arrival*—of a new world of hybrid possibility" (12; emphases in original). The "hybrid possibility" Johnston Aelabouni (2020) sees in the film and the "resolving [of] all dualisms" that Zanchi identifies, ensure the survival of Louise's world much as the knowledge that Rowlandson brought back to her Puritan community provided the tools necessary for their survival.

Reading Johnston Aelabouni (2020) and Zanchi's (2020) analysis against Byrd's assertion, it becomes clear that *Arrival* succeeds at carrying out these three actions. Consider, for instance, the "dualisms" and the "blurring" of temporal distinctions that Zanchi mentions. In her introduction to *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*, Dillon (2012) explains that "Native slipstream views time as pasts, presents, and futures that flow together like currents in a navigable stream. It thus replicates nonlinear thinking about space-time" (3). While Native slipstream is "a species of speculative fiction within the sf realm", its "stories [infused] with time travel, alternative realities and multiverses, and alternative histories" are reflective of "a cultural experience of reality" (4). Furthermore, although it may sound "avant-garde" or "cutting-edge", "Native slipstream thinking [. . .] has been around for millennia [. . .], ironically suggesting that Natives have had things right all along" (4). These conceptions of time are thus *indigenous* to what is currently known as North America. They have not been introduced to the continent (or the world, for that matter) through Abbott, Costello, and Louise; instead, they have been marginalized and

replaced by dualistic, linear thinking, to the extent that they are accepted as *alien* in such critical receptions of the film. Louise consumes Abbott and Costello's language, replaces them as knowledge holders, and becomes a human version of the aliens in that she begins thinking, dreaming, and living through their conception of time.

This leaves little hope for the kind of "new world" (in and of itself a markedly loaded term) that Johnston Aelabouni (2020) suggests is "birthed" in *Arrival*. Instead, the film follows the script of the frontier hero; one does not usher in the end of settler colonialism, but rather benefits from and continues to foster its spread and survival. In the film's final scenes, Louise emerges as a hero whose heptapod language fluency brings the U.S., China, and their future allies back together. Due to a mistranslation of the heptapod word for "tool" as "weapon", China has cut off all communication with the other countries who are engaging with the heptapods and has given the heptapods an ultimatum: leave or be destroyed. Louise's fluency in the heptapod's language has allowed her to perceive of time in the same non-linear fashion that the aliens do—allowing her to seemingly remember the future. In one flashforward (which feels like a flashback), Louise finds herself at a gala commemorating the creating of a new "unification" of countries. General Shang reminds her that, "Eighteen months ago, you did something remarkable. [. . .] You're the reason for this unification". Louise's remarkable act was changing the general's mind. Instead of attacking the heptapods, he turns towards peace after Louise, in a clandestine phone call on a stolen CIA satellite phone, breaks through the technical communication barrier that the individual governments have created between themselves to relay the dying words of Shang's wife to him—knowledge no one but Shang himself possessed. With these words, Louise convinces Shang of the potential that the heptapod's language holds as a gift and a tool rather than a weapon.

The interaction between Shang and Louise also underscores the gothic nature of her character in the novel. The knowledge she receives from Shang revolves around death and dying, and in another deviation from the source material, the inevitable death of Louise's daughter is portrayed in more emotional, haunting terms. In Chiang's novella, Louise's daughter, Hannah, dies in a hiking accident when she is twenty-five. Upon arriving to identify her body at the morgue, Louise merely remarks "Yes, that's her [. . .]. She's mine" (95). In the film adaptation, Hannah suffers from a rare illness which takes her life slowly and painfully at a younger age. Hunched over her daughter's deathbed, Louise pleads, "Come back to me", indicating that the sense of acceptance she experienced in the novella has not translated to the screen. Louise's choice, which will lead to her divorce from Ian (or Gary, as he is named in the novella) in both works, causes considerably more physical and mental anguish. In the film, her experience with the heptapods, their language, and their conception of time is markedly ambiguous, further underscoring her position as a frontier gothic hero. She returns with a boon, she strengthens her (settler) society through the extraction of knowledge from aliens in a relationship I have argued signifies the United States' history of extractive relationships and attempted erasure of the land's original inhabitants, but she is haunted by a future that simultaneously feels like the past.

Lansky's assertion that *Arrival* is a "a movie about aliens for people who don't like movies about aliens" rings at least half-true in the context of this article. It is, indeed, not a movie about aliens. Rather, as I have argued above, the "aliens" in the film signify the attempted erasure of Indigenous presences and knowledges throughout U.S. history and through the film's gothic frontier hero, Louise. If, as Byrd contends, "Indian otherness" is something to "consume", "replace", and "be" (348), then we can understand the consumption of the heptapod's knowledge as necessary to the survival of the settler-colonial state; in consuming their knowledge, these countries learn secrets that will ensure their survival just as Rowlandson's boons of the seventeenth century helped her Puritan community survive. At the same time, the acquisition of this knowledge comes at a great personal cost to Louise. At the end of the film, viewers are aware that Louise's future will hold divorce and the slow, painful death of her only child.

The film thus complicates the figure of the frontier hero by adding gothic elements of isolation, ambiguity, and death to Louise's fate: in her metamorphosis, she becomes a hero and a victim. *Arrival* therefore functions as a critique of the conception of the frontier hero through the gothicization of Louise, whilst upholding the idea of Western scientific superiority. It is, after all, Louise, a U.S. American linguist, who cracks the heptapod's code in the film, and it is her rogue phone call to General Shang that saves the planet from destroying itself in a global war. Though it may not be a film "about aliens", it is a film about what the U.S. government has and continues to treat as the alien or other and the methods by which settler society has attempted to erase such presences.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

1 Norris (2017) also notes screenplay writer Eric Heisserer's "long association with the horror genre, having written or co-written a number of feature films with horror premises, including *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (2010), *Final Destination 5* (2011), and *Lights Out* (2016)", indicating his own entrenchment in the horror genre and its treatment of "Indian" stereotypes and myths.

2 MacNeil's conception of the frontier hero draws heavily on Joseph Campbell's ([1949] 1973) "monomyth" from *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* and she uses his term "boon" here. A boon is the benefit, tool, and/or new piece of knowledge that (frontier) heroes return with after their journeys.

3 Bergland's (2000) words here are reminiscent of William Apess's (1836) (Pequot) appeals to settlers, particularly in "A Eulogy on King Phillip", in which Metacomet (King Phillip) is compared to the settler heroes of the American revolution. Apess thus speaks against English settlers framing of their own "indigeneity" to the United States during that period. As Rachel Bryant (2016) explains: "With the American Revolution, English writers in the United States finally laid claim to their own 'indigenous' North American voice and identity" (2).

4 Richter's composition is part of his 2004 album *The Blue Notebooks*, which "he describes [. . .] as a protest piece that magnifies the feeling of hopelessness and a reflection of the violence [of the Iraq War]". Since its release, it has often been used to accompany "[t]he theme of losing a loved one, grief and hopelessness" in films such as *Shutter Island* (2010) and television series such as *The Last of Us* (2023-)" (Sones 2023).

5 Luca Zanchi (2020) has noted that in general, "warmer photographic filters" are used for these prolepses whereas the narrative present is predominantly shot with a cooler filter (1).

References

Apess, William. 1836. "Eulogy on King Philip". Voices of Democracy: The U.S. Oratory Project. Available online: http://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu/apess-eulogy-speech-text/ (accessed on 26 January 2024).

Bergland, Renée L. 2000. *The National Uncanny: Indian Ghosts and American Subjects*. Hanover: University Press of New England.

Bryant, Rachel. 2016. Honey from the Rock: John Gyles and the Northeastern North American Search for Anglo Identity. *University of Toronto Quarterly* 85: 1–24. [CrossRef]

Byrd, Jodi. 2014. Red Dead Conventions: American Indian Transgeneric Fictions. In *The Oxford Handbook of Indigenous Literatures*. Edited by James H. Cox and Daniel Heath Justice. Oxford: Oxford UP, pp. 344–58.

Campbell, Joseph. 1973. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. First published 1949.

Chiang, Ted. 2002. Story of Your Life. In *Arrival*. New York: Vintage Books, pp. 91–145.

Dillon, Grace L. 2012. Imagining Indigenous Futurisms. In *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*. Edited by Grace Dillon. Tuscon: The University of Arizona Press, pp. 1–12.

Johnston Aelabouni, Meghan. 2020. White Womanhood and/as American Empire in *Arrival* and *Annihilation*. *Religions* 11: 130. [CrossRef]

Lansky, Sam. 2016. In *Arrival*, Amy Adams Takes a Walking Tour of the Universe. *Time*, November 10. Available online: https://time.com/4565975/amy-adams-arrival/ (accessed on 26 January 2024).

Lloyd-Smith, Alan. 2004. *American Gothic Fiction: An Introduction*. New York: Contiuum.

Loza, Susana. 2013. Playing Alien in Post-Racial Times. In *Monster Culture in the 21st Century: A Reader*. Edited by Marina Levina and Diem-My T. Bui. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, pp. 53–72.

MacNeil, Denise Mary. 2009. *The Emergence of the American Frontier Hero 1682–1826*. American Literature Readings in the 21st Century. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Mogen, David, Scott P. Sanders, and Joanne B. Karpinski. 1993. Introduction. In *Frontier Gothic: Terror and Wonder at the Frontier in American Literature*. Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, pp. 13–27.

Norris, Duncan. 2017. Lovecraft and *Arrival*: The Quiet Apocalypse. *Lovecraft Annual* 11: 110–17. Available online: https://www.jstor.org/stable/26868539 (accessed on 26 January 2024).

Panay, Andrew. 2004. From *Little Big Man* to Little Green Men: The Captivity Scenario in American Culture. *European Journal of American Culture* 23: 201–16. [CrossRef]

Peat, F. David. 2002. *Blackfoot Physics*. York Beach: Weiser.

Sivils, Matthew. 2014. Indian Captivity Narratives and the Origins of American Frontier Gothic. In *A Companion to American Gothic*. Edited by Charles L. Crow. Malden: Wiley Blackwell, pp. 84–95.

Sones, Zoe. 2023. The Poignant Power of Max Richter's On the Nature of Daylight. *IndieTips*, February 23. Available online: https://indietips.com/max-richters-on-the-nature-of-daylight/ (accessed on 26 January 2024).

Spiers, Miriam C. Brown. 2021. *Encountering the Sovereign Other: Indigenous Science Fiction*. American Indian Studies Series; East Lansing: Michigan State UP.

Stichhi, Francesco. 2018. From Spinoza to Contemporary Linguistics: Pragmatic Ethics in Denis Villeneuve's *Arrival*. *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 27: 24–65. [CrossRef]

Treuer, David. 2020. Reservation Realities and Myths in American Literary History. In *Cambridge History of Native American Literature*. Edited by Melanie Benson Taylor. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, pp. 349–64.

Visnansky, Jay. 2017. "Abbott & Costello in Silent Movie 'No Indians Please!'" 1948, Uploaded by Jay Visnansky on Youtube, March 3 2017. Available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m-QynORC2jg (accessed on 26 January 2024).

Zanchi, Luca. 2020. The Moving Image and the Time of Prophecy: Trauma and Precognition in L. Von Trier's *Melancholia* (2011) and D. Villeneuve's *Arrival* (2016). *Journal of Religion & Film* 24: 1–22. Available online: https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol24/iss1/56?utm_source=digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol24/iss1/56&utm_medium=PDF&utm_campaign=PDFCoverPages (accessed on 26 January 2024).