Between

North American Indigenous Perceptions of the Apocalypse and a Renewal of Kinship Relationships through the Imagination

Francesca Mussi

Abstract

Interweaving Ecocriticism, Settler Colonial Studies, and Indigenous Studies, this essay interrogates the concepts of climate change and the apocalypse, repositioning them alongside Indigenous experiences of broken kinship relationships. Focusing on the Canadian Indigenous context, I first discuss the settler colonial implications of environmental apocalypse, arguing that Indigenous peoples are already living in a post-apocalyptic condition. Secondly, I explore the Indian Residential School policy as an example of how settler colonialism contributed to creating the post-apocalyptic situation in which Indigenous peoples live today. Thirdly, through the analysis of Lee Maracle's "The Void" and Daniel H. Justice's "The Boys Who Became the Hummingbirds", I discuss how both stories employ imagination to place environmental disasters in conversation with settler colonial practices, thus re-shaping understandings of the past, present, and future. Ultimately, both stories, as I argue, promote Indigenous traditional knowledge systems and kinship values as a way to maintain respectful and reciprocal kinship relationships among humans and between humans and the land.

Keywords

Apocalypse; Climate change; Settler colonialism; Canada; Indian residential schools; Indigenous kinship; Imagination

Between, vol. XII, n. 24 (novembre/November 2022)
ISSN: 2039-6597
DOI: 10.13125/2039-6597/5158

North American Indigenous Perceptions of the Apocalypse and a Renewal of Kinship Relationships through the Imagination[1]

Francesca Mussi

Introduction

Originating from the Greek *apocalypsis* (i.e. 'uncovering', 'revelation'), the word 'apocalypse' is associated biblically with the end of the world (or the end of time) and secularly with a very serious event resulting in destruction or damage on a catastrophic scale, such as war or environmental disaster. This essay engages with the secular dimension of the concept of the apocalypse and with the ways in which it is often employed as an ecocritical trope. Lawrence Buell has argued that «[a]pocalypse is the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal» (Buell 1995: 285). Drawing on this perspective, Greg Garrard highlights how apocalyptic rhetoric may play a crucial role in environmental discourses, as it is capable of galvanising activists, of «converting the undecided and ultimately, perhaps, of influencing government and commercial policy» (Garrard 2011: 113). It should not be surprising, then, that today discourses concerning climate change and environmental crises often acquire apocalyptic tones, becoming central topics within international political and cultural landscapes. The United Nations Climate Action group warns that the climate crisis is worsening every day, impacting on people's lives everywhere, and it calls for urgent actions to address this emergency (WMO 2021). Many international politicians, artists, film stars, academics, activists, and ordinary citizens have

[1] The research for this essay has been supported by a Leverhulme Early Career Research Fellowship held at the University of Northumbria.

come to question what the future might hold and they are working to develop strategies to prevent future disaster scenarios.

The question about the future, though, acquires a different connotation from Indigenous[2] perspectives. As this essay intends to demonstrate, there is consensus among Indigenous scholars that Indigenous peoples understand their vulnerability to the current anthropogenic climate crisis as an intensification of colonially-induced changes. Focusing on North America, especially the Canadian Indigenous context, this essay thus aims to contribute to environmental criticism and Indigenous Studies by exposing the racialised and settler colonial implications of climate change and throwing light on the concept of the apocalypse, as well as bringing to the fore Indigenous kinship values and traditional knowledge systems. To this end, I have divided this essay into three main sections. Firstly, I discuss how current anthropogenic climate and environmental changes must be placed in dialogue with settler colonialism, thus outlining the present as a post-apocalyptic condition for Indigenous peoples. The second section discusses the Indian Residential School policy as an example of how settler colonialism contributed to creating the post-apocalyptic situation in which Indigenous peoples live today. In particular, I explore how residential schools impacted and continue to impact on Indigenous values, lifeways, and relations to the land[3]. Thirdly, I analyse two speculative short stories, "The Void" by Lee Maracle (Salish/Métis) and "The Boys Who Became

[2] The term 'Indigenous' encompasses a wide range of culturally, linguistically, and geographically differentiated peoples. Originating from the Latin root *indigena*, which means 'sprung from the land', it has been used in international and United Nations contexts to define peoples in relation to their colonisers. Indigenous peoples from around the world share common problems related to how colonial empires have compromised their rights to traditional lands, territories, and natural resources. Here, I will draw on the works of Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars and writers from different parts of the world; however, focus will be placed on North America, especially Canada. Please note that there are other terms to refer to Indigenous peoples in the Canadian and North American contexts, such as 'Aboriginal', 'Native', or 'Native American'. Unless otherwise indicated by the scholars quoted in the present essay, I will use 'Indigenous' to refer to Indigenous peoples as a collective group. When referring to a specific author, I will opt for their tribal affiliation.

[3] In this essay I use 'land' to refer to non-human elements of creation such as plants, rocks, trees, waterways, and animals with which Indigenous peoples have physical, emotional, and spiritual relations.

the Hummingbirds" by Daniel H. Justice (Cherokee), to show how both authors advocate the renewal of Indigenous knowledge systems, kinship values, and cosmovisions through storytelling and imagination. Through the portrayals of apocalyptic scenarios of an ecologically damaged Earth, both stories, as I argue, expose the colonial implications of environmental change as a way of re-shaping understandings of the past, present, and future. A way of reconfiguring the apocalypse as an experiential, rather than a speculative, future scenario.

Repositioning environmental apocalypse between past, present, and future

The concept of the Anthropocene has appeared widely in Western debates about climate change, eco-apocalyptic scenarios, environmental sustainability, and environmental justice. It was first coined in 2000 by atmospheric chemist Paul J. Crutzen and limnologist Eugene F. Stoermer (2000) to designate a new geological epoch marked by human-induced changes on Earth's geology and ecosystems, including, but not limited to, anthropogenic climate change[4]. Helmuth Trischler (2016) notices how, less than two decades after the term was coined, the Anthropocene debate has expanded beyond the realm of the biological and geological sciences to become a cultural concept, capturing the interest of scholars from the social sciences and humanities, and, perhaps most importantly, acquiring the potential to redefine the relationships between humans and nature. Sociologist and anthropologist Bruno Latour (2014, 2015), for instance, engages with the concept of the Anthropocene to challenge the boundaries between nature and culture, and to call into question the anthropocentrism that has resulted from this dichotomy, thus attributing agency to both human and non-human factors[5]. Building on Latour, Trischler (2016) argues that, despite many controversies surrounding the term, the Anthropocene allows us to transcend the Western modern dichotomy of nature-culture and to endorse a vision of humans and the environment as intrinsically and inextricably intertwined.

In contrast, there is much scholarship, Indigenous but also non-Indigenous, which has been overtly sceptical of ecological concepts emerging as critical strains within the Western (or Euro-American) academy such as the

[4] See also Crutzen 2002.

[5] See Chakrabarty 2009; Chakrabarty 2016.

Anthropocene. Métis scholar Zoe Todd warns against the use of a universalising species paradigm such as the Anthropocene, as it tends to obfuscate the distinctions between the people, nations, and collectives who drive the fossil-fuel economy and those who do not (Todd 2015: 244). Similarly, Audra Mitchell points out, «the Anthropocene is not the product of "humanity", but rather particular segments of it» (Mitchell 2015: n.p.)[6]. Potawatomi scholar and activist Kyle Whyte also argues that «anthropogenic climate change makes Indigenous territories more accessible and Indigenous peoples more vulnerable to harm, just as did laws, policies, boarding schools, and the like in previous episodes of colonization», establishing a direct connection between current Indigenous vulnerability to climate change and the history and present practices of settler colonialism and capitalism (2017: 157). In particular, Indigenous peoples and allies, Whyte highlights, «examine climate change less as a future trend, and more as the experience of going back to the future» (*ibid*: 156), as colonially-induced changes have harmed Indigenous peoples and their ecosystems since the early days of colonial contact. Significantly, Whyte emphasises that «Indigenous peoples live in worlds so changed by colonialism, capitalism, and industrialization», to the point that it is possible to define the present condition as *already* post-apocalyptic (*ibid.*: 160).

The connection between anthropogenic climate change and settler colonialism can be attributed to different understandings and relations to the land. According to Māori philosopher Christine Winter (2018, 2019), Western societies tend to understand nature as property with monetary and instrumental value to humans due to its potential to contribute to human material and physical well-being. On the other hand, Indigenous peoples are profoundly connected to their land and its natural elements: land is kin; Indigenous peoples learn from and with the land. In *As We Have Always Done*, Mississauga Nishnaabeg storyteller, scholar, and activist Leanne B. Simpson explains how Michi Saagiig Nishinaabeg knowledge system, the education system, the economic system, and their political system «were designed to promote more life. Our way of living was designed to generate life—not just human life but the life of all living things» (Simpson 2017: 3). This passage suggests that Indigenous peoples do not relate to the land by possessing it or having control over it, but through connection. And it is that intimate connection between Indigenous bodies, minds, spirits and the land that settler colonialism has tried to break through a series

[6] See also Bauer and Ellis 2018.

of policies in order to warrant their claim over Indigenous homelands, to take control of those territories, and, ultimately, to exploit its natural resources. Colonial dispossession of Indigenous homelands, the assimilation into Christian Western values, the exploitation and extraction of natural resources and capitalism have produced environmental changes affecting and destroying the ecosystems on which Indigenous people relied:

> Extraction and assimilation go together. Colonialism and capitalism are based on extracting and assimilating. My land is seen as a resource. My relatives in the plant and animal worlds are seen as resources. My culture and knowledge is a resource. […] The act of extraction removes all of the relationships that give whatever is being extracted meaning. Extracting is taking. Actually, extracting is stealing—it is taking without consent, without thought, care or even knowledge of the impacts that extraction has on the other living things in that environment. That's always been a part of colonialism and conquest. (Simpson 2017: 75)

Settler colonial practices and current anthropogenic climate change are profoundly related. In a recent interview with Grist, Whyte encourages peoples to think of climate change through kinship time:

> Climate change itself is not caused solely by the increased concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. It's also caused by historic breakdowns in kinship relationships. Industries are responsible for the major physical drivers of climate change – extractive industries, fossil fuel industries […] In a context like the Americas, these industries took root because they dispossessed Native people of their land, which was a profound disrespect for kinship. (Whyte 2021: n.p.)

Whyte thus suggests that the current climate crisis is not only environmental, but it is «built off of generations of inequity» (*ibid.*). If people do not recognise the connection between past practices and present legacies, then it is not possible for society as a whole to find meaningful solutions and act upon them to create an ecologically safe and respectful future.

The apocalypse of the Indian Residential School System

Certainly, of all the policies that the settler colonial regime initiated in Canada, the design and the implementation of the Indian Residential School (IRS) system had, and continues to have, the most destructive effects

on Indigenous communities, their lifeways and ecosystems. Such effects could be described as apocalyptic. Christian missionary-based schools had been run since the early days of colonial contact in order to spread 'civilisation' and to educate Indigenous peoples according to Western values, but it was during the second half of the nineteenth century that the IRS system was implemented. Until then, British colonial officials had approached Indigenous peoples as military allies and business partners in the fur trade. However, by the mid-nineteenth century they started to be perceived as obstacles to colonial progress and expansion towards the Northwestern territories, still primarily occupied by Indigenous peoples[7]. It is within this political-historical context that Indigenous peoples were addressed as the 'Indian Problem'. As a consequence, assimilation and civilisation through the residential school policy became fundamental tools to remove Indigenous peoples as 'obstacles' to settlement and nation-building. Operating for more than a century since their establishment in the mid-nineteenth century, Indian residential schools began to be phased out only in the 1960s and 1970s, in conjunction with a heightening of pan-Indigenous activism, primarily led by former residential school attendees, who arose in defence of Indigenous rights. The last federally-run residential school, Gordon Indian Residential School, located in Saskatchewan, officially closed its doors in 1996 (Stout and Kipling 2003). The harms caused by residential schools include, but are not limited to, widespread sexual, physical, emotional, and spiritual abuse; bullying (student-on-student abuse); the aggressive assimilation of Indigenous children into Western-Christian culture; substandard living conditions; and neglect resulting in death and disease (Aboriginal Healing Foundation 2002)[8]. For the purpose of this essay, I will be focusing on the cultural, emotional, and spiritual losses that Indigenous children

[7] For a comprehensive history of the implementation of Indian residential schools (or boarding schools) in Canada and the U.S., see Miller 1996; Milloy 1999; Woolford 2015.

[8] Since breaking the silence about the devastating impacts of the IRS system on Indigenous peoples in the early 1990s, Canada has been committed to restoring relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples through a series of reconciliatory and redress polices, including governmental apologies, reparation schemes, commemoration projects, and the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2008-2015). It is beyond the scope of this essay to explore the ways in which the Canadian federal government addressed the impacts and legacies of the IRS policy. For more details about Canada's redress strategy, see Regan 2010; Niezen 2013; the TRC Reports 2015; Capitaine and Vanthuyne 2017.

experienced while attending Indian residential schools.

Aiming to impose Christian and Western values, residential schools taught Indigenous children that their cultures and traditions were «the way of the devil» (Monchalin 2016: 126). Upon arrival at school, Indigenous children were assigned a number and their names were replaced by French or English names. Traditional long hair or braids were either cut short or shaved off. Traditional clothing was also replaced by standard school uniforms. In addition to 'civilising' the Indigenous children's appearance, the coloniser's language (either English or French) was forced upon them, while the use of Indigenous languages was prohibited. The majority of children, however, had little or no knowledge of English (or French), and they were often punished for this reason or for being caught speaking their Indigenous languages. Kinship was specifically targeted by the residential school policy, as Daniel Justice underlines (Justice 2018: 58).

A fundamental value in Indigenous cultures, kinship is understood as the «profound power of our relationships to one another and to our other-than-human relations» (*ibid.*: 78). Introducing the Anishinaabe concept of *Mino-bimaatisiwin*, which means 'living well' or 'good life', environmentalist and scholar Deborah McGregor (Anishinaabe) explains the critical importance for Indigenous cultures to engage in (and maintaining) respectful, reciprocal, and balanced kinship relationships with one another as humans, but also with non-human entities, i.e. with the land. Significantly, McGregor goes on to argue, «constant application of knowledge, learning and practice enables the dynamic transformation that is required to ensure that 'living well' occurs over time» (2018: 225). Forcing away Indigenous children from their communities and their homelands, the IRS policy set out to disrupt family and community bonds, as well as land-based relationships. In "Land Speaking", Okanagan author Jeanette Armstrong observes how the land holds all knowledge and constantly speaks to Indigenous peoples: «[Indigenous peoples] survived and thrived by listening intently to its teachings — to its language — and then inventing human words to retell its stories to our succeeding generations» ([1998] 2017: 142). Indigenous knowledge systems are informed and shaped by their relationships to the land. The banning of Indigenous languages on the one hand, and the separation from their homelands on the other, were clearly used by residential schools as a powerful strategy to further sever Indigenous children's connections with their traditions and with the ancestral teachings inherent in the land.

In addition to undermining family/community ties and land relations, Indian residential schooling also had crucial impacts on Indigenous

views on gender and sexuality, thus affecting other kinds of kinship relationships[9]. Kinship, in fact, also encompasses relationships with «the marginalized within our own human societies» (Justice 2018: 79), such as non-heteronormative individuals and women. Prior to colonisation, Indigenous categorisation of gender identities and sexual practices were as diverse as Indigenous cultures themselves. Whilst «it is important not to romanticise Indigenous peoples as being uniformly accepting of gender and sexual fluidity», Kwagiulth scholar Sarah Hunt emphasises, it is safe to assert, broadly speaking, that Indigenous views on gender and sexuality, and therefore on the roles in the communities, were not rooted in Western heteropatriarchy and heteronormativity (Hunt 2016: 7). Indigenous nations, for example, acknowledged (and still acknowledge) the existence of alternative notions of gender to the Western male/female binary, such as two-spirit peoples, namely those peoples who embody both male and female spirits. As Cree playwright and novelist Tomson Highway observes, Indigenous worldviews had «room for the idea of men with the souls of women and women with the souls of men» (Highway 2014: n.p.). Two-spirit individuals were accepted and integrated members of Indigenous communities, endowed with social prestige, and their roles contributed vitally to their communities' survival and well-being, including roles as teachers, knowledge keepers, healers, spiritual leaders, mediators, artists, and warriors (Hunt 2016: 7).

The term 'two-spirit' was chosen as an intertribal lexeme to be used in English in the early 1990s as a way to encompass a broad range of sexual and gender identities of Indigenous peoples outside dominant Western binaries[10]. Whilst some employ this coinage to refer specifically to the cultural roles of individuals possessing both male and female spirits, 'two-spirit' is also used today as an umbrella term to describe Indigenous peoples who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and with further cate-

[9] There are certainly other polices that expose the gendered dimension of settler colonialism, such as the Indian Act and the reserve system. See the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Report, Volume A (2019).

[10] The term 'two-spirit' was chosen as a collective lexeme to challenge the use of the colonial 'berdache', a word that was coined by Western anthropologists and scholars in the nineteenth century to describe Indigenous alternative gender identities and roles. See Jacobs, Thomas, and Lang 1997; Roscoe 1998; Morgensen 2011.

gories that fall outside Western heteronormativity (Driskill 2010: 72)[11].

The arrival of Europeans in North America, with their agenda of colonial conquest, deeply impacted on Indigenous communities. As a matter of fact, colonial structures went beyond the physical and included assaults on ways of knowing and understanding gender and sexuality. In this connection, Leanne Simpson highlights how

> the bodies of [two-spirit] people, children, and women represented the lived alternative to heteronormative constructions of gender […] They are the embodied representation in the eyes of the colonizers of land, reproduction, Indigenous governance, and political systems. They reproduce and amplify Indigeneity, and so it is these bodies that must be eradicated. (2017: 41)

Indian residential schooling was certainly a powerful weapon to carry out this attack on Indigenous bodies, especially the bodies of children, women, and two-spirit people. The banning of Indigenous languages in residential schools prevented children from learning knowledge about two-spirit identities and their roles within communities. In school spaces, female and male students were also divided into clearly separated spheres of activity, with even brothers and sisters being kept separate. Boys would perform agricultural and manual labour and girls would undertake domestic chores, thereby complying with the same gendered division of labour that privileged the masculine, as was the norm with the colonisers' culture. Yet, scholar Will Roscoe observes that, although work roles in Indigenous nations were organised on the basis of gender, women were allowed to make important contributions to their families' subsistence and «opportunities for women to acquire prestige and take leadership roles existed in every group […] from matrilineal groups like the Hopis, Zunis, and Iroquois to the warrior-dominated Plains tribes» (1998: 6-7).

Be that as it may, the imposition of European heteropatriarchal conventions was very damaging to Indigenous students and future generations, as they impinged on how young Indigenous peoples understood their identities and roles in their communities, especially in relation to women and two-spirit peoples. Furthermore, gender was also enlisted for punitive purposes at some schools. For example, a former student of Fort Alexander

[11] Some Indigenous peoples prefer 'two-spirit', while others opt for 'queer' or the acronym 2SLGBTQA+.

Resident School in Manitoba recalled being forced to wear a female dress because he kept trying to spend time with his sisters and thereby violated the school's rules of gender segregation (Wolford 2015: 168). At residential schools, male students were taught that to be feminine was to be weak and that masculinity consisted in a specific set of performances, that is to say, being tough, fearless, and unemotional. Punishments particularly shamed those who subverted mainstream gender and sexual performances.

Today, Indigenous communities are still affected by the imposition of settler colonial gender and sexual norms, as well as by discrimination against gender diversity and fluidity. Both Indigenous women and two-spirit people face targeted violence and discrimination within Indigenous communities and non-Indigenous contexts (Hunt 2016). According to the Report of the Eagle Human Rights Trust (2016) «the notion that such gender and sexual non-conforming behaviour was sinful, criminal, or symptomatic of disease was entirely unknown among Aboriginal People prior to Contact». Thereby, one gathers that the fuelling of homophobic and hostile sentiments against those who do not conform to heteronormativity within Indigenous communities can be traced back to settler colonial policies, which aimed to dismantle Indigenous traditions, belief systems, and kinship relationships with one another and with the land (quoted in Sinclair 2016: 16). The IRS system certainly played a crucial role in the colonial attempts at dismantling Indigenous cultures, causing what can be described as a proper apocalypse. This prevented Indigenous children from learning about their knowledge systems, traditions, kinship values linked to their parents, their communities, and their land, and from passing on this knowledge to future generations.

The question is: how can Indigenous peoples survive this kind of apocalypse? Or, rather: how can Indigenous peoples learn to live in a post-apocalyptic situation where kinship relations with one another and with the land have been damaged, where traditions and knowledge systems have been marginalised and replaced by settler colonial dominant narratives? As the next section shows, Indigenous storytelling and imagination massively contribute to healing broken kinship relations and to paving the way for a renewal of their traditions, kinship values, and ecosystems.

Experiential imagination: Indigenous speculative fiction as a site of healing and renewal of kinship relations

Now I turn my attention to two speculative short stories, which use

imagination to re-shape understandings of the apocalypse and to renew Indigenous traditions, kinship values, and ecological knowledge. Borrowing Cherokee author Daniel H. Justice's words:

> imagination is essential to the empathy required for healthy, respectful, and sustainable relationships with a whole host of beings and peoples, from cedar trees and magpies to thunderstorms and moss-blanketed boulders. Simply put, there can be no true kinship without imagination. (2018: 77)

One could argue that the imagination is a form of speculation or of escapism possibly inappropriate to address the pathology of colonialism, its lingering effects and environmental changes, as opposed to more realistic forms of fiction and storytelling. But, as Justice emphasises, when «the apocalypse or environmental catastrophe appears as [an] overt theme in Indigenous writing, it's more than speculation – it's experiential, even in its most fantastical, because in a very real way it hasn't ended» (*ibid.*: 168). The imagination challenges a set of assumptions and expectations about the 'real', opening up and expanding a whole range of possibilities. It provides a way for re-shaping the past, present, and future and for re-centralising Indigenous lifeways, intelligence systems, and kinship values.

Maracle's short story "The Void" immediately plunges the reader into an ecologically damaged Earth, where everything is melting. People are melting from the inside everywhere; the land, the non-human world, is also dying. The sky is so hot that it even melts the imagination: «[t]he imagination, once a cool spot, a retreat to comfortable dreaming of a place in which hope was spawned, became a crazy dancehall squeezing the life out of hope» (Maracle 2016: 10)[12]. Within this devastation, only the flies, to which the dead give birth, seem to thrive. A small group of one hundred and fifty people is able to get away from this dying Earth and reach safety in a satellite station. This escape occurs through a shape-shifting process, which the survivors call 'flashing'. This process must be internally induced, and, as the narrative unfolds, those who have managed to flash exist in a sort of incorporeal form, hearing tribal voices and their consciousness through a mind channel.

It is important to notice that this group of survivors consists of six

[12] Subsequent references are to this edition of "The Void" and will be cited parenthetically by page number in the text.

Black people and three Asians, while the rest, the majority of them, are Indigenous peoples. There are no white people among the survivors because, as the narrator, Tony from the Lakota Nation, explains, «we had agreed on that. We never wanted this to happen again. We were clear. We figure there was something in their blood, something in their genetic makeup drove them to effect this meltdown, so no one taught them how to flash» (11-12). Although Maracle does not provide clear space-time coordinates, readers can infer that the group of survivors is from North America; Tony makes reference to Indigenous nations that are from North America, such as the Lakota, the Salish, the Ojibway, and the Haudenosaunee nations. This information must be read alongside the aforementioned passage: through Tony's narrating voice, Maracle conveys her criticism towards the white-settler society, or rather towards its approach to the land and its natural resources. This approach is based on ownership and extraction and has its roots in settler colonialism and capitalism. In McGregor's view, white-settler society is being held responsible for bad or inappropriate conduct (for *madjiijwe baziwin*, in Anishinaabe language), namely the inability to guarantee the preservation of a balance with respect to human communities and the land (2018: 226). This thoughtless approach has caused the warming and environmental disaster portrayed in the story, and that is the reason why white people were not taught how to flash.

As Tony reveals, flashing is an Indigenous cultural practice, a practice that was illegal until 1952. It seems that, in a similar fashion to other Indigenous ceremonies such as the Sun Dance, flashing was forbidden by settler colonial policies, and, like the Sun Dance ceremony, Indigenous peoples were allowed to practice it again in mid-twentieth century[13]. In addition, it is revealed that, since flashing was legalised, humans have been practicing it for over one hundred years to be prepared for the day when escape would be necessary (11). This signals that peoples were expecting climate change to worsen and reach a point where flashing would play a critical role for their safety, thus suggesting that, as Justice points out, the «apocalypse isn't a single event, it's an ongoing and relentless process, not unlike settler colonialism itself» (2018: 168).

Significantly, out of one hundred and fifty survivors, one hundred and forty are women, and it is women who seem to have crucial answers

[13] For more details about the Sun Dance, see the Canadian Encyclopedia at https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/sun-dance (accessed March 10, 2022).

about the people's current condition. For example, Ellie, an Indigenous woman, tells the group that «we are waiting to begin again […] So we are here, waiting for the damage to be repaired. Our mother will send us a messenger and we will de-flash and start over» (15). While they are waiting, the survivors' existence is threatened by the entity of the Void, a sort of male space predator (21) who, although bodiless, feeds off feelings of fear which have the power of sucking the life out of human beings. Maracle here establishes a compelling parallel between the Void and settler colonialism: given the gendered dimension of the latter and the ways it targeted women (but also non-heteronormative individuals, as seen in the previous section on the apocalyptic legacies of the IRS policy), it is in turn the women's fear «which excited the void and freed him to move» (23). Notably, as the narrator comes to realise, «[the men] were for the first time in a long time completely dependent on women» (24).

Indeed, if the women's fear can trigger the Void, it is also the women who discover that, to keep this entity at bay, the group needs to rely on the imagination: «*imagine future, imagine return. Get past return. Imagine beyond survival*» (21); «Imagining a future where Earth is completely healed, where «the grass is so green […] Earth is sobbing, huge racking sobs of relief» (*ibid.*). The imagination becomes the key to survival and the renewal of kinship relations; through it, the majority of survivors is able to fight against the malignant entity of the Void:

> Belief took on a physical sensation and hung in the air like it was real. […] we danced […] through time, through space and into imagined future, far from the dangerous edge, far from losing it, and the void quieted. We felt safe. *Song, dance and belief – more keys*. (23)

When the time comes, the group is finally allowed to return to Earth, now a «deep lush green» (25), and, under the women's guidance, they settle on a piece of land, ready to begin again (*ibid.*). By giving women this guiding role, Maracle writes back to the gendered dimension of settler colonialism and its underlying heteropatriarchal philosophy, acknowledging the importance of women and their contributions to the well-being of Indigenous communities. In addition to renewing Indigenous traditional knowledges, kinship values, and lifeways, Maracle's story leaves readers with a final message advocating the sharing and respectful co-existence of different traditions and cultures.

If Maracle places the healing process of Earth in conversation with the contribution of (Indigenous) women to the leadership and well-being

of the community, Daniel Justice's "The Boys Who Became the Hummingbirds" explores the connection between climate change and the gender and sexual discrimination hurting those who do not conform to Western heteronormativity. Speaking from an indefinite time and place, a third-person narrator describes how Earth has been profoundly affected by climate change:

> Food no longer nourished the People, who sat listless and grim in the shadows, hiding from the parching sun. Unhealthy waters flowed sluggish and mute in staining colours of orange, red and brown. Plants had long ago withered and blown away, when the People thought the drought was at its worst, before it worsened further […] It was a place of daily cruelty, where laughter was only mockery, where touch was meant to hurt, where beauty went to die. (Justice 2016: 54)[14]

From the outset, readers understand that Strange Boy, the protagonist, is a two-spirit individual and a knowledge keeper who is committed to healing his world. Despite being young, the narrator says, Strange Boy remembers those «whispered tales» and how «once, long ago, beauty had lived there, too, long before the People had turned against the world, one another, and themselves» (*ibid.*). The narrator here draws a crucial parallel between how the People turned against the world and the land, probably causing the current drought, and how they turned against one another, harbouring cruel feelings towards those who are different, as exemplified by the People's responses to Strange Boy's attempts at healing the world. The pathway to healing, Strange Boy believes, is to renew the beauty that once characterised the world, and he thereby commits himself to this task:

> When others trudge to their daily labours, Strange Boy danced at their side […]. When their voices go mute or grow fierce, he lifted his shaky voice in song. He carefully gathered bright pigments from hidden places and used them to dye his rough cloth into hues long unseen by eyes grown weak from disinterest. (55)

Every attempt that he makes through dance, song, and colourful clothes, however, is met with suspicion and hostility, as the People refuse to accept the beauty that Strange Boy is trying to bring back. Although res-

[14] Subsequent references are to this edition of "The Boys Who Became the Hummingbirds" and will be cited parenthetically by page number in the text.

idential schools are not mentioned, the People's hostile behaviour calls to mind the homophobic sentiments existing within Indigenous communities and which, according to the Report of the Eagle Human Rights Trust aforementioned, can be attributed to settler colonial policies, such as the IRS system, and the ways in which these have been internalised by Indigenous communities[15].

Despite this negative response, Strange Boy continues to carry out his mission until, one day, the People turn to violence to express their disapproval of the young boy's attempts. They strip him naked, beat him, and drag him to the farthest borders of the town, forbidding him to return. Hiding in the hills, alone and wounded, Strange Boy is about to lose hope, when help and comfort come in the form of Shadow Boy. Strange Boy and Shadow Boy are not strangers, as they shared more than one tender moment in the past, but their love remained in the shadows because Shadow Boy was too scared of the People's judgement and prejudice. Now Shadow Boy asks for forgiveness for his cowardice and the two boys finally embrace. While sharing this loving moment, their bodies begin to change until they are transfigured into hummingbirds: «Scarred skin became bright feather; brown eyes darkened black; sable hair brightened to iridescent green and scarlet and turquoise» (56).

In this feathered form, the Hummingbird Boys return to the place they once called 'home' and, to their amazement and joy, they discover that they can see the People's hearts. This newly acquired power allows them to realise that many of them do have hummingbird hearts, even though those hearts are held captives by self-loathing, prejudice, and the fear of judgement. The Hummingbird Boys then decide to free those hearts by «calling to them in soft voices, sharing stories of possibility beyond the grim dust of what *was* to a hopeful possibility of what *could be*» (57). Echoing "The Void", imagining «what could be» becomes a regenerating and healing force, able to restore healthy relations. Indeed, many people are to join the Hummingbird Boys in their mission, becoming birds themselves. At the same time, not everybody welcomes this message of love: some look at the birds in fear, others in disgust, while another group starts tossing sharp rocks into the sky to hit as many birds as possible. Despite encountering challenges, the Hummingbird Boys and their message of love, beauty, and acceptance prevail, and, in parallel with their triumph, the land starts to

[15] As regards sexual discrimination towards Indigenous bodies as a legacy of settler colonialism, see also Justice 2018: 105-109.

heal: «soon the air thundered with the defiant song of a thousand bright hummingbirds, and the world came alive again in a loving beauty too long denied […] It was a time of rebalancing, of taking account, of healing» (58). Most people welcome the world's renewed splendour and decide to return to their traditional knowledges, «to their stories of times when they created beautiful things» (*ibid.*), committing themselves to caring for one another and for the world itself in better ways than they have done so far.

Justice's story ends with a powerful message regarding the renewal of kinship relations, inviting people to accept everybody's beauty as well as difference, «[f]or it was beauty, and two brave, loving hearts, that had brought them back together to one another. This is a teaching, and a remembrance» (59). By juxtaposing environmental restoration with the overcoming of the prejudice and discrimination harming those who fall out of the heteronormativity spectrum, Justice acknowledges the contribution that two-spirit people can make within communities, as well as the importance of kinship relationships among humans and between humans and the land.

Both "The Void" and "The Boys Who Became the Hummingbirds" resort to imagination at two different levels, i.e. as a key feature for characters to heal the ecologically damaged world they live in along with their own interpersonal relations. The power of the imagination is also a narrative strategy to which Maracle and Justice resort to invite readers to better assess environmental dangers. The enhancement of the imagination should not be particularly surprising in this context because, as Garrard highlights, «apocalypticism is inevitably bound up with imagination, because it has yet to come into being» (2011: 94). However, my comment on the two stories has shown that, while the authors portray an *imagined* dying Earth, they also poignantly connect this environmental apocalypse with the traumatic legacies of settler colonialism, an apocalypse which has already occurred from Indigenous perspectives. Drawing on the lived experiences of Indigenous peoples – including the banning of cultural traditions and the gender/sexual discrimination against those who fall outside Western binary thinking – Maracle and Justice rely on what could be defined as *experiential imagination*, as they depict the apocalyptic consequences of settler colonial policies, such as the IRS system, on Indigenous cultures, lifeways, cosmovisions, and the related views on gender and sexuality.

«Stories operate in the world and get results. Stories shape our understandings of the past, tell us who we are, and provide a vision for the future», scholar Jessica Senehi argues (2000: 110). "The Void" and "The Boys Who Became the Hummingbirds" do exactly that. Echoing Whyte's

call for looking at the climate change crisis through kinship time (2021), these stories, as this essay has demonstrated, re-shape the concept of environmental apocalypse, situating it alongside historical, colonially-induced traumas and Indigenous experiences of broken kinship relations. Most importantly, these stories highlight the significance of storytelling and the imagination as a way towards re-shaping understandings of the past, present, and future and renewing Indigenous traditional knowledge systems and kinship values. Quoting again Daniel Justice, «there can be no true kinship without imagination» (2018: 77), and without kinship, as we have seen, there can be no respectful and reciprocal relations between humans and between humans and the land. In other words, without it, there can be no *Mino-bimaatisiwin*.

Works Cited

Armstrong, Jeannette, "Land Speaking" (1998), *Read, Listen, Tell: Indigenous Stories from Turtle Island*, McCall, Sophie - Reder, Deanna - Gaertner, David - L'Hirondelle Hill, Gabrielle, Eds., Waterloo, Wilfried Laurier University Press, 2017: 141-156.

Bauer, Andrew M. - Ellis, Erle C., "The Anthropocene Divide: Obscuring Understanding of Social-Environmental Change", *Current Anthropology*, 59.2 (2018): 209-227.

Buell, Lawrence, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing and the Formation of American Culture*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1995.

Capitaine, Brieg - Vanthuyne, Karine (eds.), *Power through Testimony. Reframing Residential Schools in the Age of Reconciliation*, Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 2017.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh, "The Climate of History: Four Theses", *Critical Inquiry*, 35.2 (2009): 197-222.

Ead.,(2016) "The Human Significance of the Anthropocene", *Reset Modernity!*, Ed. Bruno Latour, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2016, 189-199.

Crutzen, Paul J., "Geology of Mankind", *Nature*, 415.51 (2002): 23.

Crutzen, Paul J. - Stoermer, Eugene F., "The 'Anthropocene'", *Global Change Newsletter*, 41 (2000): 17-18.

Driskill, Qwo-Li, "Doubleweaving Two-Spirit Critiques: Building Alliances between Native and Queer Studies", *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 16.1-2, (2010): 69-92.

Garrard, Greg, *Ecocriticism*, 2nd ed., London-New York, Routledge, 2011.

Highway, Tomson, "Repairing the Circle", *Masculindas: Conversations about Indigenous Manhood*, Sam McKegney, Ed., Winnipeg, University of Manitoba Press, 2014. Kindle edition.

Hunt, Sarah, *An Introduction to the Health of Two-Spirit People: Historical, Contemporary, and Emergent Issues*, Prince George, National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health, 2016.

Jacobs, Sue-Ellen - Wesley, Thomas - Lang, Sabine, *Two-Spirit People. Native American Gender Identity, Sexuality, and Spirituality*, Urbana-Chicago-Springfield, University of Illinois Press, 1997.

Justice, Daniel H., "The Boys Who Became the Hummingbirds", *Love Beyond Body, Space & Time. An Indigenous LGBT Sci-Fi Anthology*, Hope Nicholson, Ed., Winnipeg, Bedside Press, 2016: 54-59.

Ead., *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, Waterloo, Wilfried Laurier University Press, 2018.

Latour, Bruno, "Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene", *New Literary History*, 45.1 (2014): 1-18.
Id., "Telling Friends from Foes in the Time of the Anthropocene", *The Anthropocene and the Global Environmental Crisis: Rethinking Modernity in a New Epoch*, Eds. Hamilton, Clive - Bonneuil, Christophe - Gemenne, François, London, Routledge, 2015: 145-155.
Maracle, Lee, "The Void", *Mitêwâcimowina: Indigenous Science Fiction and Speculative Storytelling*, Ed. McLeod, Neal, Penticton, Theytus Books, 2016: 9-25.
McGregor, Deborah, "Reconciliation and Environmental Justice", *Journal of Global Ethics*, 14.2 (2018): 222-231.
Miller, James R., *Shingwauk's Vision: A History of Native Residential Schools*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1996.
Milloy, John S., *'A National Crime': The Canadian Government and the Residential School System, 1879-1986*, Winnipeg, University of Manitoba Press, 1999.
Monchalin, Lisa, *The Colonial Problem: An Indigenous Perspective on Crime and Injustice in Canada*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2016.
Morgensen, Scott L., *Spaces between Us. Queer Settler Colonialism and Indigenous Decolonization*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2011.
Niezen, Ronald, *Truth and Indignation: Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission on Indian Residential Schools*, 2nd ed., Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2017.
Regan, Paulette, *Unsettling the Settler Within. Indian Residential Schools, Truth Telling, and Reconciliation in Canada*, Vancouver, UBC Press, 2010.
Roscoe, Will, *Changing Ones: Third and Fourth Genders in Native North America*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1998.
Senehi, Jessica, "Constructive Storytelling in Intercommunal Conflicts: Building Community, Building Peace", *Reconcilable Differences: Turning Points in Ethnopolitical Conflict*, Eds. Byrne, Sean - Irvin, Cynthia L., West Hartford, Kumarian Press, 2000: 110.
Simpson, Leanne B., *As We Have Always Done. Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2017.
Sinclair, Niigaanwewidam James, "Returning to Ourselves: Two Spirit Futures and the Now", *Love Beyond Body, Space & Time. An Indigenous LGBT Sci-Fi Anthology*, Ed. Hope Nicholson, Winnipeg, Bedside Press, 2016: 12-19.
Stout, Madeline D. - Kipling, Gregory, *Aboriginal People, Resilience and the Residential School Legacy*, Ottawa, Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2003.
Todd, Zoe, "Indigenizing the Anthropocene", *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies*, Eds.

Davies, Heather - Turpin, Etienne, London, Open Humanities Press, 2015: 241-254.
Trischler, Helmuth, "The Anthropocene. A Challenge for the History of Science, Technology, and the Environment", *NTM* 24.3 (2016): 309-335.
Whyte, Kyle, "Indigenous Climate Change Studies: Indigenizing Futures, Decolonizing the Anthropocene", *English Language Notes*, 55.1-2 (2017): 153-162.
Winter, Christine J., "Does Time Colonise Intergenerational Environmental Justice Theory?", *Environmental Politics* 29.2 (2019): 278-296.
Woolford, Andrew, *This Benevolent Experiment Indigenous Boarding Schools, Genocide, and Redress in Canada and the United States*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2015.

Sitography

Aboriginal Healing Foundation, *The Healing Has Begun*, Ottawa, Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2002, https://www.ahf.ca/publications/residential-school-resources, web (last accessed 25/03/2022).
Mitchell, Audra, "Decolonizing the Anthropocene", 2015 https://worldlyir.wordpress.com/2015/03/17/decolonising-the-anthropocene/, web (last accessed 28/02/2022).
National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Report, Volume A, 2019, https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/final-report/, web (last accessed 20/03/2022).
The Canadian Encyclopedia, https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/sun-dance, web (last accessed 10/03/2022).
TRC Reports, 2015, https://nctr.ca/records/reports/#trc-reports, web (last accessed 20/03/2022).
Whyte, Kyle, "To solve the climate crisis, we must first repair our relationships", *Grist*, 08.09.2021, https://grist.org/climate/to-solve-the-climate-crisis-we-must-first-repair-our-relationships/, web (last accessed 25/03/2022).
Winter, Christine J., *The Paralysis of Intergenerational Justice: Decolonising Entangled Futures* (PhD Thesis), University of Sydney, retrieved from https://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/handle/2123/18009, web (last accessed 25/03/2022).

WMO (World Meteorological Organization), "State of the Global Climate 2020", 2021, https://library.wmo.int/index.php?lvl=notice_display&id=21880#.Ydxrf_4o_rd, web, (last accessed 28/03/2022).

The Author

Francesca Mussi is "Cultore della Materia" in English Literature in the Department of Philology, Literature and Linguistics at the University of Pisa. She has recently completed a Leverhulme ERC fellowship in the Department of Humanities at Northumbria University (2018-2021). Her Leverhulme ECR fellowship focused on examining the extent to which the work of the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission related to Indigenous epistemologies and perspectives. Her research interests include postcolonial theory, Gender Studies, Trauma Studies, Ecocriticism, South African literature, Indigenous literature within the Canadian context, and notions of redress and reconciliation. Among her recent publications are *Literary Legacies of the South African TRC: Fictional Journeys into Trauma, Truth and Reconciliation* (Palgrave Macmillan 2020) and "Land and Storytelling: Indigenous Pathways towards Healing, Spiritual Regeneration and Resurgence" (*Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 2021: 1-17).

Email: francesca.mussi@northumbria.ac.uk

The Article

Date sent: 31/03/2022
Date accepted: 31/07/2022
Date published: 30/11/2022

How to cite this article

Mussi, Francesca, "North American Indigenous Perceptions of the Apocalypse and a Renewal of Kinship Relationships through the Imagination", *Entering the Simulacra World*, Eds. A. Ghezzani - L. Giovannelli - F. Rossi - C. Savettieri, *Between*, XII.24 (2022): 401-422, www.betweenjournal.it