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Space in the Post-Apocalyptic Genre

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ABSTRACT

Western post-apocalyptic narratives project a world in which historical and geographical realities are fractured, as they both deny and wield the experiences of colonized and post-colonial populations. This structural appropriation focuses on a Western vision where the notion of space is recreated into new areal boundaries in which native geographies are obscured. A comparison of Western and North American Indigenous post-apocalyptic fictions shows a dichotomy between the nation-state and Indigenous governance as well as a ruptured vision of land property separating nature and culture, and finally a divided notion of homelessness and sense of place. The Indigenous discourses embrace contemporary issues as they focus on futurity, while Western scenarios are enrooted in colonial assumptions and structural appropriation.

Western post-apocalyptic fiction re-imagines a world in which the notion of space is obscured, the historical landscape ungrounded and pre-colonial geographies shattered. North American narratives deny Indigenous geographical imaginaries but also appropriate the past violence inflicted upon native populations, in Eurocentric world-threatening futures. This structural appropriation of space is projected onto American, predominantly white, characters and readers (HSU & YAZELL, 2019:8). The notion of space in the post-apocalyptic genre is anchored in a Western vision that creates new areal boundaries and excludes Indigenous geographical futures. A comparison of Western and North American Indigenous post-apocalyptic fictions, with an intersectional view of historical and fictional post-colonial scenarios, reveals that the former is built upon experiences of colonized and post-colonial populations and interferes with historical and geographical realities. An analysis of the etymological and historical backgrounds of the Western post-apocalyptic fiction leads to the illustration of a dichotomy between the nation-state and Indigenous governance, by demonstrating a structural appropriation in the course of nationalistic policies. Moreover, Western and Indigenous visions of land property indicate a divide between nature and culture. Further, homelessness in post-apocalyptic scenarios cultivates a colonial assumption in Eurocentric narratives and a focus on futurity in Indigenous discourses.

Post-apocalypse western fiction re-imagines the space where most environmental crises happen worldwide, although the narrative is frequently portrayed in US spaces. Affecting populations are generally located in big northern US cities, and most vulnerable populations (poor, radicalized or Indigenous) are not depicted. Characters find themselves struggling through the environmental crisis without acknowledging the past affected colonized populations that survived it in the same territory (HSU & YAZELL, 2019:7). This alternative fantasy of factual historical and geographical events uses the conditions of colonialism experienced by indigenous populations to portray white Americans in dystopian futures (HSU & YAZELL, 2019:8). In fact, the Western post-apocalyptic genre created this narrative based on the collective imaginary. Etymologically, the term *frontier* originates from the Middle English *frounter* and means "the edge of a settled area" or "front" (PETERSON, 2014:5). Hence, the frontier represents the edge between the settled and unsettled. The significance of "front" also implies that a "frontier" is something in relation with something else. Therefore, the main feature of the post-apocalyptic genre is not that of an apocalypse but is defined against something that it is not—a well-established and uncontestable social order (PETERSON, 2014:5). It creates boundaries and limitations that characters can be depicted within or without. The apocalypse is defined as "revealing," which in turn indicates that the post-apocalyptic world can be considered as an unveiling truth, due to the social order that it breaks down (PETERSON, 2014:23). Space and temporality disclose not only the possibilities of scenarios but also "what characters perceive, and by extension, what they think, feel, and believe about the world" (PETERSON, 2014:7). Historically, to fully instill their western regime, settlers constructed the land through the legal spatial category of property. In their narrative, space was entirely occupied by the settler, with no imaginary space for Indigenous governances. The control of the landscape was used to maintain a social and political order. In Canada, the British Columbia treaty states (EGAN & PLACE, 2013:5):

> An extent of land rights across dozens of Indigenous territories. By signing a treaty under this process, an Indigenous group cedes its claim to land across its larger ancestral territory in exchange for clearly recognized property rights to a small portion of its territory, what are called ''treaty settlement lands''. In British Columbia, treaty settlement lands generally make up between 5% and 10% of the Indigenous group's ancestral territory. These treaties also often provide Indigenous signatories with limited access to resources outside of treaty settlement lands (e.g., allocations of fish, game, water) and may allow for some limited forms of resource co-management with the Crown outside of treaty lands

Fundamentally, the Western discourses imposed a dichotomy. Settler governments claimed Indigenous domains to justify modernity (MIGNOLO, 2013:15). They reshaped the territories with the illusion of progress through new political policies, dreams of economic growth and innovative social practices (HOWITT, 2012:3). This egocentric, fictional worldview led nations to believe remote places relied on state interventions for survival (EGAN & PLACE, 2013:3). Westerners refuted other forms of governance, pretending that alternative systems, by not being modern, were delinked from history (MIGNOLO, 2013:15). The political ideology of the nation-state asserted possession of the land, authority over Indigenous affairs and jurisdictional sovereignty, overpowering geographical and historical details (HOWITT, 2012:8). Indigenous populations were forcibly removed from their traditional territories, stripped of any spatial control in reserves, some forced to constant mobility or life in remote locations, separated from their families and communities (EGAN & PLACE, 2013:2). The dominant discourse was built upon imagined geographies and not the realities of the places, re-affirming racial marginalization and systemic inequality (HOWITT, 2012:3). However, "one's vision of the past may not reflect reality" (PETERSON, 2014:33). The history and geographical realities need to be considered outside the dominant discourse, through "decolonial thinking" (MIGNOLO, 2013:1). Personal success, competition and social innovation are Western myths and do not reflect a universal reality. In settler discourse, the Indigenous populations were not bearers of alternative knowledge but limited to implement the West's ideas of governance (HOWITT, 2012:12). From the Indigenous perspective, the concept of property is not one of possession but of how the lands can be shared on a nation-to-nation basis (EGAN & PLACE, 2013:6). Commonly, Indigenous peoples believe that natural features can host a soul or embody a relationship; therefore, they are not interchangeable. Each piece of land holds a peculiar geography and history that is not replicable or enjoyable elsewhere (EGAN & PLACE, 2013:8). Effectively, the Indigenous scope of land suggests the lively presence of intangible objects that are lived through human participation. The territory is alive, where both objects and humans develop. Contrastingly, the Western post-apocalyptic genre reinstates "the frontier" in readers by undoing everything that it made possible: homes, economies, nations. The space of "the frontier" is a metaphor for human development (PETERSON, 2014:32). In Cormac McCarthy's The Road (2006), the characters are trying to reach the coast, seen as the ultimate frontier and an imagined refuge (TASCON, 2020:14). Nevertheless, this fantasized space happens to represent the same reality as the road, the new reality, the new world: vast, gray, desolated and related to death; as opposed to its usual meaning: freedom (TASCON, 2020:15). The concept of sense of place is lost, and what remains are transitional, dynamic, inhospitable spaces in which the characters try to survive. The relationships between people are silenced. The lack of human development is portrayed through the absence of proper place names, as the ruined civilization is a past event (KUNSA, 2009:9). The fact that the characters omit the names of their pre-apocalyptic environment makes use of onomastics to open a new landscape that allows the characters to imagine their future world (KUNSA, 2009:10). However, the author sentimentalizes the horrible facts, as the experience lived by conquered civilizations is used to demonstrate the Western struggle. The protagonists come across an old plantation house that has become a cannibal stronghold. The main character encounters "a basement filled with still-living victims held captive" (HSU&YAZELL, 2019:11). The scene is an opportunity to lead the reader to compare the horrific reality with the historical context of the plantation house. This allusion supports the conception of a larger timeline, comparing acts of inhumanity throughout North American history. Nevertheless, the comparison of structural violence does not explore the interrelation between past and future apocalypses but instead amplifies the human relationship between the father and the son. In fact, just as the "frontier" offers transformation, a space for human development, the man and child represent hope, a possible future for humankind. The narrative directly correlates parental care with human survival and characterizes the apocalypse in Biblical terms (HSU&YAZELL, 2019:11). Therefore, even though the violent history of the United States is mentioned, its effect is reserved to sanctify the two characters and their resilience. By contrast, examples of Indigenous counter-narratives represent a communal global struggle. In How to steal a canoe by Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2016), the sense of place is lost because the canoe is being held captive in a museum. According to many Indigenous beliefs, a canoe is a work of art and a practical tool that holds a soul. The relationship between people and objects is a living one. Westerners placed the canoe in a museum to preserve it, but the character considers it hanged like a person in jail as it is an object meant to be used, meant to be in water. The canoe is referred to as "she", and the main character tries to comfort her as if the canoe were human. Furthermore, the two Indigenous characters do not have proper names; they are referred to as "Akiwenzie" (the old man) and "Kwe" (woman). The old man is also a savior, a figure of experience

and knowledge. The characters are defined by their gender and age, meant to represent everyone in the community. Contrary to McCarthy's novel, this perceived lack of onomastics embodies the Indigenous ethics of communal values. Additionally, Indigenous scenarios imagine new futures without rejecting reality. In the Muskogee community in the US South, a prophecy foresees the return of Indigenous ways of life within the ruins of Western myths (BLOCH, 2019:1). It mentions the destruction of the world and the necessity to turn to Indigenous knowledge. Indeed, by taking advantage of marginalized populations and using the resources of the earth, settlers interrupted their relationship with nature (BLOCH, 2019:3). According to the Talwa prophecy, Indigenous peoples have shown a capacity to adapt and flourish in the face of hardships imposed by settler colonialism and other oppressive structures, including environmental challenges; therefore, they possess the best knowledge to face the apocalypse. Indigenous knowledge is based on ways and experiences of inhabiting the territory. Their understanding is dynamic, evolving in harmony with nature to pursue future possibilities. The prophecy imagines the past in a way that portrays settler nation-states as an ephemeral historical memory (BLOCH, 2019:6).

Indeed, Indigenous nations have shown long-term resilience and persistence against dominant and oppressive governance. Indigenous perspectives of land do not divide the inanimate and the animate but include both objects and humans in a line of connection. This model encourages inclusion between the land and the people, but also between nations as all share the same territory (EGAN&PLACE, 2013:6). According to Mignolo, "decolonial thinking is certainly innovative" (2013:10), as it affirms pluralist and inclusive discourses, promoting the communal and mutual as an alternative to the Western structure. Indigenous populations re-affirm their geographical belonging through post-apocalyptic narratives. In parallel to this model, Indigeneity represents nature and culture together, whereas the Western narrative juxtaposes them. From the settler perspective, "land is a commodity designed for human occupation and consumption that can be exchanged in the market [...] reflecting the centrality of the individual and the understanding that human beings are fundamentally separate from nature" (EGAN& PLACE,2013:8). Therefore, these historical representations show a conflict where nature and culture are in a constant altercation and are reproduced in the Western post-apocalyptic literature model (WADBLED, 2020:3). Nature has retrieved its rights, while humanity has been almost instinct. This narrative shows both the failure of the human to master the world's nature and the destruction of its cultural world in the process (WADBLED, 2020:5). By seeking to change the natural environment and artificially adapt it to the Western myth of modernity, humans destroy any long-term life for themselves. In the post-apocalyptic society, humans struggle for survival in an unknown and unpredictable environment (WADBLED, 2020:6). As Hsu and Yazell remark, "the post-apocalyptic narratives evoke a sense of recent mourning for the disappearance of privileged, unsustainable, modes of consumption pioneered by the US" (2019:15). In most Western post-apocalyptic scenarios, human flaws initiate mass destruction (PETERSON, 2014:27). Moreover, when a new social order is created, it is built upon the remains of the old society. It is as though the ground itself is contaminated by the human social organization (space) and has no other choice but to fall and rise again in an eternal circle (time). For example, in Justin Cronin's The Passage (2010), a virus, meant to be a new immunity-boosting drug, is developed in a North American facility, but the virus wrongly transforms people into vampire-like creatures (LEAVENWORTH, 2017:2). The project is based on a virus carried by a species of bats in South America, which maintains the colonial assumption on the primitivism of South America. The post-apocalyptic human communities live within walls, disregarding the real, current events of Indigenous people living in reserves. Moreover, the book is set by the temporal marker A.V., an abbreviation for After Virus (LEAVENWORTH, 2017:6-7), as the new time is organized around the presence or absence of Europeans on the land and completely erases the presence of past populations on the territory. Finally, the characters are in a constant quest for cultural remains, seen as the sole means to recreate a social order (LEAVENWORTH, 2017:2). Contrastingly, Indigenous post-apocalyptic narratives reconnect with the colonial past to consider the present problems and imagine new futures. Indigenous American writer Sherman Alexie portrays the apocalypse in his narratives as a "slow environmental violence" (HSU & YAZELL, 2019:8), as it is dispersed across time and space. The local loss of species and ecosystems lived by Indigenous people are at the heart of his work. In opposition to the universality of the Western narrative, Indigenous discourses emphasize the local calamity. Indigenous peoples faced an apocalypse and, today, are still forced to readjust to their ever-changing realities. Sherman's work exhibits a constant struggle of poverty, violence and alcoholism, as a direct consequence of the local loss experienced by the Native population. Additionally, Sheila Watt-Cloutier, an Inuit writer, describes in her book The right to be cold (2015) how the structural violence inflicted by the settlers led the locals to completely alter their relationships with the land. She explains how the extermination of sleigh dogs by the Canadian government reshaped the landscape, as the population had to rethink their family model (each newborn was traditionally given a sleigh dog), hunting practices and eating habits. The community changed its social, political and economic organization.

In the Western post-apocalyptic world, the disconnection from the previous cultural knowledge is so vast that all spaces have lost their purpose. Egan and Place introduced the concept of the "third-worlding of the West: the geopolitical conflicts and internal violence push the population to a state of extreme poverty; the characters become refugees in their own land, vulnerable and dangerous" (2013:10).

Homelessness becomes the general condition, the social norm. The sense of home is absent (TASCON, 2020:2-3). For example, the first episode of The Walking Dead (October 31, 2010) recalls the familiar narrative of the old North American figure (the cowboy from the Hollywood Western genre) that mounts a horse to go conquer the territory (PETERSON, 2014:3). In this episode, Sheriff Rick Grimes gathers supplies at the nearest police station, dresses himself in a police uniform and a cowboy hat, to then mount a horse and ride away. The character represents the ultimate symbol of human civilization and negates the historical veracity of Native Americans killed during the conquest of the North American West. The narrative portrays the terrible struggle this white-survivor character faces, consolidating the settler national identities while marginalizing Indigenous nations. Furthermore, In Paolo Bacigalupi's The Water Knife (2015), climate change provokes a permanent drought in the North American South West, and barons are trying to take control of the last water resources. The main character tries to redirect water rights from precarious communities to his employer. The narrative stresses how class and geography have led to the unequal distribution of water. For example, Texas is depicted as a failed state, and Arizona is on the verge of social collapse. Worldwide, Mexico has failed, and China represents the future. The South of the United States is, once more, depicted as a failure due to its social instability. Mexico, as a failed country, also maintains a colonial assumption about the primitivism of Central/South America. Indigenous people are completely absent from the account, and the violence experienced by the characters is re-appropriated from populations that have already been touched by these issues today (HSU & YAZELL, 2019:10). In the Indigenous post-apocalyptic world, water is polluted. Jay Odjick, a Canadian Indigenous writer, portrays these pollution issues through the superhero figure Kagagi. Mothers cannot breastfeed due to the radium present in the water. As a matter of fact, water has no borders, although the Western modes of consumption have contaminated it and deprived some communities from using it freely. The author re-appropriates the heroic figure to educate his community about contemporary issues. His educational commitment is at the intersection between his two cultures, between tradition and social innovation. What is more, the post-apocalyptic film The Northlander (2016) by Métis filmmaker Benjamin Ross Hayden features a solely First Nations cast, in which people have learned to accept their place within the nation, rather than imposing themselves like the settlers. Through his storytelling, the Indigenous writer builds a fantasy world in which his community is not weighed down by Eurocentric narratives. The movie tells the story of a post-apocalyptic world, in the year 2961, where nature has recovered the land. The main character, Cygnus, is a hunter. He is meant to travel across a desert valley to protect his people from a band of Heretics that are trying to retrieve past cultural remains. Cygnus has to find a way for his people to survive. The story is inspired by the historic journey of the Métis leader Louis Riel in the 1880s. The knowledge transmitted through the narrative draws attention to traditional aspects of the Métis culture, such as mobility. For example, while retrieving knowledge for the past civilization, Cygnus encounters video extracts where the dying "human" (settler) voice says to her child, "Anywhere in the world will be your home". Instead of reinforcing the long-denigrated nomadic practices of many Indigenous nations, this scene is used as a response by the population to embrace mobility as their way of living (HSU&YAZELL, 2019:14). The story highlights the past to show that the apocalypse is nothing new for Indigenous peoples like the Métis. The film empowers the community, as the conventional marginalization of radicalized populations is inverted to center the question on Indigenous futurity.

Western discourses refer to problems of geographically uneven environmental violence and obscure their historical conditions. By contrast, Indigenous narratives frame the apocalypse as a past event, "a condition to inhabit and learn from" (HSU&YAZELL, 2019:15). The split between these two worldviews is reinforced by the historical and geographical realities of structural appropriation, the opposition between nature and culture as well as the concept of homelessness and sense of place. Indigenous resilience and the growth of Native diasporic voices lead the apocalyptic genre to develop counter-narratives and variables within artistic codes. The hybridity between social innovation and traditions welcomes new figures and possible scenarios. The geographical landscape of Indigenous discourses embraces contemporary issues related to nature and climate change, diversity and inclusivity on the land, enrooting them in the past experiences of colonized populations. Westerners re-use the past, while Indigenous peoples invent the future.

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