

How do Indigenous writers' treatments of apocalypse compare to Butler and Atwood's?

Hanna Remtulla and Dr. Rebecca Ballard

Abstract:

In an age when Los Angeles is going up in flames while Florida is covered in a blanket of snow, climate change—though often politicized—has revealed itself to be a very real threat to our planet. There are now undeniable signs that Earth is experiencing unprecedented environmental changes, though one could argue that they were already predicted.

Warnings about humanity's impact on the planet have existed for decades, yet until the past 50 years, they were largely ignored. When climate change movements first emerged, society often dismissed them, believing the issue was insignificant. However, literature has the unique ability to engage with political and global issues in a way that is both accessible and thought-provoking. Novels, specifically, can explore these topics with a depth that avoids the bluntness of academic articles. In this way, **authors have used fiction to emphasize and exaggerate pressing issues**—such as climate change—so that readers can understand and **recognize their severity**.

There are now undeniable signs that Earth is experiencing unprecedented environmental changes, though one could argue that they were already predicted. This is where literature has had the unique ability to engage with political and global issues, both accessible and thought-provoking.

The term **apocalypse** generally refers to the near-total destruction of life, particularly concerning nature. Climate change can be considered a form of apocalyptic destruction, and refer to the devastation inflicted by humans upon other humans. In 1944, Raphael Lemkin coined the term **genocide** to describe “the systematic destruction of a cultural, ethnic, or national group.” In this sense, **genocide and ecological apocalypse share fundamental similarities in how they disrupt and erase entire communities**.

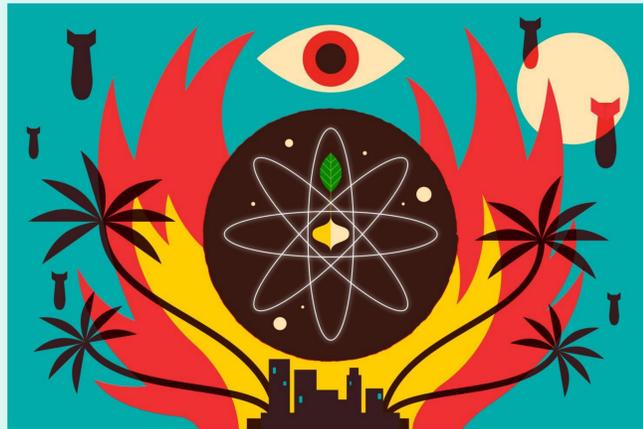
For Indigenous populations, apocalypse has occurred. Colonization brought destruction on an apocalyptic scale, meaning Indigenous perspectives on the end of the world differ significantly from those found in Western dystopian literature, like the works of Octavia Butler and Margaret Atwood.

This study examines how apocalypse is portrayed in Butler's *Parable* series and Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy in comparison to Indigenous dystopian novels, Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book* and Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves*. Through this literary analysis, I argue Western *cli-fi*, a term coined by Dan Bloom to describe climate fiction, mainly allocates ecological collapse to governmental failures or unethical human actions, **projecting apocalypse as a near-future event**. In contrast, Indigenous *cli-fi* emphasizes colonialism and land exploitation as the root causes of ecological destruction, **portraying the apocalypse as an ongoing reality with lasting consequences**.

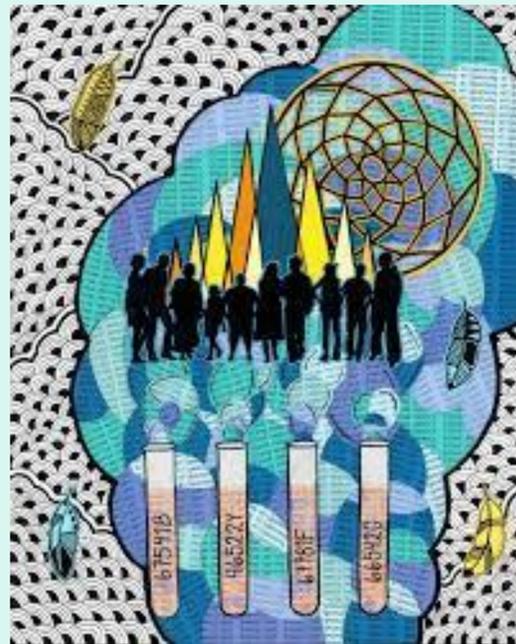
Methods:

Working alongside my mentor in manuscript preparation, I utilized my mentor's research on Climate Apocalypse and 'cli-fi' through the lens of Octavia Butler's *Parable* series and Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* series. I conducted my research on the idea of Indigenous apocalyptic experiences through novels. A section touched on by my mentor, I wanted to delve deeper into these ideas.

To accomplish this, I researched Indigenous dystopian novels written by Native Americans that were created through a collection of true events. Reading *The Swan Book* by Alexis Wright and *The Marrow Thieves* by Cherie Dimaline, the focus will be on the situations the protagonist is in, the impact the climate and other actions are having on society, and how the perspective of an apocalypse is described. I planned to distinguish the differences in how each situations are written and the type of situations described.



This is a graphic to describe the civilization of "Earthseed" a fictional religion and philosophy with the focus of shaping and adapting to create a better future. This is designed using elements of Lauren Olamina, the protagonist. The imagery of the falling bombs depicts ongoing nuclear warfare, with the atomic symbol aligning nature vs. science and how they are linked. This picture links Indigenous and eco-dystopian themes, reflecting on how survival is intertwined with the environment.



This is a depiction of *The Marrow Thieves* by Cherie Dimaline by Jenna Rose Sands, published by the London Public Library. Certain elements directly derived from the novel, such as the test tubes being a sign of exploitation, the dreamcatcher as a depiction of cultural identity, and the color theme of blue demonstrating mourning and loss.

Results:

My Thesis:

While Western dystopian fiction, exemplified by Margaret Atwood in the *MaddAddam* series and Octavia Butler in the *Parable* series, depicts apocalypse as a societal collapse that leads to human and nature destruction and quality of life, Indigenous writers, *The Swan Book* by Alexis Wright and *The Marrow Thieves* by Cherie Dimaline, reframe this term as an ongoing process rooted in colonialism and ecological destruction.

- Continuation or Catastrophe: One of the main points of contrast is the idea of whether or not this is a future collapse based on society or governmental actions. Indigenous texts write about how **this collapse is an ongoing process, an extension of colonial violence**. In contrast, Western fiction describes this same thing as **a fault of human greed that is a futuristic idea**.
- Survival: In Atwood and Butler, the resistance is very individualized to the protagonist and the author, respectively in the first-person point of view. Whereas within Indigenous speculative fiction is usually put into a group of oral traditions and the role of community. Due to the context in which **the apocalypse occurs for each of the characters they are fighting different internal and external battles**. The external battle for the Indigenous was colonialism, heavily paired with a racist ideology, meaning they needed to survive together to preserve their community and not be alone in the fight for their identity.
- Land Devastation: A point that all novels, at the least, touch on is the land devastation and the ecological damage done to the environment. These are central points to the novel and causes of why there is a disruption in each of the protagonists' lives.
- Methods of Employing Speculative Fiction: **Each author embeds urgency** in their respective texts. However, it is done in differing ways and for various purposes. Atwood highlights the environment destruction through irony and a nonlinear storytelling method. Social issues are taken to an extreme and exaggerated to make societal flaws more visible. Butler focuses on the systems of power in place and survival through adaptation. Her writing pushes the limits to the extreme which allows the audience to witness the adaptation and survival of the protagonist. A phrase throughout the *Parable* series is “God is change,” reinforcing the idea that reform is to change rather than resist (Butler 11). Atwood and Butler did this by reflecting on social and political problems, mainly with the idea of hierarchy and power. Wright writes in a place that comes from myths, dream-like distortions, and the Indigenous developmental structure to feature displacement. Dimaline does have factors of speculative fiction, though, unlike the other authors, she **stressed that the violence of colonialism is already apparent** and the consequences of a social and environmental collapse. Wright and Dimaline, while both very different writers, exaggerated the resistance of the Indigenous population and a reflection of the environmental ruin. Their main focus contrasted with **Atwood and Butler as they emphasized that the idea of apocalypse is present and the Indigenous population has already faced it**. Instead of dystopia and apocalypse being futuristic, Wright and Dimaline make the reader understand that violence is actually an extension of history.

References:



Importance:

Understanding the ideas of colonialism and the almost destruction of a human race alongside the environment is critical to understanding that by these terms, it is genocide, but it also falls under the category of what an apocalypse is. This preconceived notion of what we all think an **apocalypse is futuristic, similar to how Butler and Atwood introduce the idea, and is false using the terms of what genocide is**. The Indigenous population is a vital example of the almost complete genocide in the United States. Knowing and realizing that the idea of apocalypse is here and can happen allows us to realize that this dystopian and 'impossible' ideal is possible.