

# **The End of the World, for Whom? or, Whose World? Whose Ending? An Afrofuturist and Afropessimist Counter Perspective on Climate Apocalypse**

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With the horrific disasters our planet and this country have been confronted with this year, it is almost easy to forget that the world is supposed to be ending sometime soon due to climate change. According to the UN, we have 10 years to get our act together. 9 years. 8 years. 7 years. 6... How many years are even left? A few years for us to change everything about our society. Faced with a pandemic that has only helped to make time feel truly meaningless, I know I can't be the only person fearful that they have lost count. I can already feel the time left for us to right the ship escaping me, like sand falling between my fingers. I know that for many, when they think of the responsibility we have before us to "fix" what is so deeply broken, they are transfixed with terror, paralyzed by a fear of loss, or frozen by the enormity of the crisis.

I am not here to tell you that it will be ok. If it was ever my job to console you, it certainly is especially not my job in this moment, as a Black man who just survived 2020. I am actually here to confirm that the apocalypse is coming. The world is ending. Nothing will ever be the same. But I am also here to question whether that is even a bad thing. If it is a bad thing, then who is this ending a bad thing for. Whose world is ending?

Truly, on this planet, there are many people for whom the world is already over. Who have very little to lose. Some of them live a world away; some of them live a mile away; some of them live even closer. They will never see the nature that so many environmentalists are fighting to protect, they continue to have very little if any access to the resources that the climate change advocates are asking them to conserve, and they are not a respected part of the climate change conversation.

Our society fears a coming climate apocalypse, but so many people in our society have already faced their own personal apocalypse, and at the hands of the same reckless and greedy powers which have caused this current catastrophe. When will their suffering hold meaning for the rest of us?

This is why climate change cannot be fixed with a simple chart depicting emissions reductions, creative blockchain carbon taxation, or other magical accounting that allows us to cancel out local emissions through trees planted (allegedly) entire continents away. There is no technology that can save us from ourselves, and if we can't see the incredible opportunity before us to change the problems that lead us to this very precipice in the first place, if we can't embrace that challenge then... who are we? If we don't want to face that reality of the billions of apocalypses both gone and current, and instead choose half measures that will take carbon from the air but leave the world a shattered and unequal place... then do we even deserve this precious planet?

For many fearing climate change apocalypse, they fear their lives changing forever, their access to natural wonders canceled, their children's economic futures uncertain, their sacrifices of comfort and convenience in vain due to petty partisan politics. It is their world that is ending. For so many others, the Apocalypse has already happened. In fact, the world has already ended several times. It ended the moment Columbus landed on the islands of the Caribbean. It ended for the kidnapped villagers in Western Africa—my ancestors—when they were stuffed into the wicked belly of a slave ship and cast into slavery in a strange land with a strange new climate. It ended with the first blanket covered in smallpox. It ended on Thanksgiving Day. It ended with the Trail of Tears. Agent Orange. Hiroshima. The Holocaust. It ended with Hurricane Katrina, Maria, Kenneth, Harvey and Dorian. It ended for George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. It ended in an ICE camp on the border. It ended for the 2 million, and counting, killed by COVID-19.

So many people have already faced the ends of their own civilization. So many people have already faced the ending of their personal worlds. Most of these shattered worlds never truly recovered. None of them have ever been given what they, as sacrifice zones sanctioned to enable the perpetual motion of our economy, are owed. They have never even had a real slice of this world, to begin with. This was not their world. These people and their ancestors know better than any of us how to tackle what's coming, and what forces have allowed it to come, even as they face the new onslaught of climate change impacts which they have so little responsibility for causing.

Our global civilization, the one that everyone reading this article is benefitting from, was built on the literal ashes of other civilizations. Meanwhile, a few white men from a few white nations have made nearly all of the decisions that have led us to this present point. To this present danger. Ending any inconvenient worlds that fell into their path along the way. Justifying their revolting actions with caste and class. In many ways, this looming chaos is nothing more than the culmination of those generations of recklessness. In many other ways, the terror of oncoming apocalypse only reminds those with broken worlds of how forgotten they are and

have always been. My family, and my colleagues in the BIPOC-led climate justice movement, have grown up out of these shattered post-apocalyptic worlds, they are our story, our burden, and our strength, and to be frank, the world that so many fear losing... is not a world that we have ever had full access to.

This is not to mean I am hopeless or bitter. I find great strength in honoring the generations of pain and suffering that have allowed me to exist, and given me my own small chance to change the story. It is in fact these billions of broken worlds that allow me to access a stream of radical imagination and audacious hope, to see a future that many mainstream climate activists, academics, and policymakers could scarcely picture. One way or another Climate Change will end our world. But not all endings are bleak. Not every end carries with it tones of Ragnarok or Armageddon. The future could hold the end of human life *as we know it...* but are you really certain that would be a bad thing? Sure, this coming age could be the end of life on our planet. Alternatively, it could be the end of all the ugly things that caused our environmental problems in the first place.

We are offered an unprecedented attempt to change the very worst things about our society. To redistribute the power which has been abused continually to lead us to this point. We are also offered an unprecedented attempt to see our doom looming before us and to do nothing in response but suck carbon out of the air and spray aerosols. Apolitical ahistorical solutions for a political problem that bleeds history. Like taking a mild decongestant when you have a critical case of pneumonia. In approaching climate change, we have a unique chance to change the scale of our society. To right centuries of wrongdoing. See, we have a choice: ignoring the social implications of climate change is also ignoring human suffering, the reckless extravagant greed, and the global inequality that allowed climate change to happen. Honoring that suffering, and centering it, abolishing it, may be our only hope. For so many of us, the world is already over! Protecting this spent shell, that a few live on prosperously, is not an inspiration for us.

Imagine a world without inequality. A world that doesn't depend on resources reaped through modern-day imperialism. An economy that doesn't depend on environmental degradation, or take homelessness, illness, and starvation as givens. A world without first-worlds or third-worlds. Without poverty and endless war. A world where nature itself has indisputable rights, and people of all colors have indubitable entitlements to access that nature safely without harm from police violence, pollution, and corporate exploitation. A world where wealth distribution matters far more to us than GDP. A world where we don't even need vacations because we have redefined and reclaimed labor as a source of joy, fulfillment, and healing. Is it hard to imagine? Ok, that's fair. But how difficult? More difficult to imagine than a world-ending cataclysm like a megadrought? More difficult than the end of humanity itself? Perhaps that is a large part of the problem at hand: we need to learn how to radically reimagine the world that's possible.

Yet those voices who could teach this radical envisioning of the future, those voices who have already survived apocalypses, are so often excluded from this conversation. Their pain, and suffering, and broken worlds are not a part of the

discussion. When you find yourself in rooms of privilege and power, with apolitical solutions to climate change that do not address its social responsibility being poured into your ear, ask yourself who is not sitting at the table, and who is missing? Call attention to whose voice is not being heard. Who is not a part of the climate change dialog? So let me also ask: Who has the most to teach our society about triumphing over unbelievable odds and hardship? Who is already faced with apocalyptic conditions on a daily basis? Who has witnessed the end of the world? When do we let them speak? When do we honor their pain?

For those of us still feeling the urgency of our survival, and the fear of loss in the face of climate change, perhaps we need to reexamine the entire premise. My ancestors and my tradition frame this problem entirely differently. Human society will persist. The real question is: what will survive of who we are now? The best of our world... or the very worst? It's our job, our privilege, to decide that, and as environmental practitioners, as activists, as academics, as concerned human beings, we will need more than carbon offsets to do our part. We will need outspoken bravery, a commitment to justice, and audacious levels of radical hope. We will need to know ourselves, and we will need to know history: that hideous stream of imperialism and colonialism that led us to this most current apocalypse, and ended so many beautiful worlds on our way here.

This radical hope, this fearless acknowledgement of the horrors of the past, and bold imagination aimed towards the future is a key difference between the mainstream Climate Change movement and the Climate Justice movement that I have joined: we know that a world with less carbon in the air isn't necessarily a better world. Yet in fighting to keep carbon in the ground, not with technology, but by changing who we are and what we stand for... we can build a world that is better for everyone. A world that is more just, more kind, and so much less precarious than what we have right now. A world where pandemics and hurricanes and government-sanctioned killings don't shockingly "reveal" what so many of us have known as truth for generations. A world that finally begins to do justice to the countless worlds sacrificed in the name of this one. Truly, the world is ending, and honestly, it's about time. Not all ends are bad. Far from it. The end of sexism, racism, corporate corruption, inequality, and apartheid in all its forms. The real thing here is hope and the audacity, the bold daring, to imagine a future that is so much better than what we have right now. Ask. Have you given yourself permission to see this future?

That audacity begins with realizing that the world we have now simply isn't that great, and for so many people—the world's global majority, in fact, it never has been. This audacity is endowed to many of us whose ancestors were never a part of this world, who proudly and enduringly carry the ends of shattered civilizations on our shoulders. Put more simply, it's not our world that's ending, and by letting go of it we are left with an incredible freedom. We are freed from those half-measure solutions that attempt to preserve the status quo, those mere slivers of prosperity we have guaranteed a few, and in doing so gamble with our survival rate like the quarterly profit margins for some Dow Jones corporation. This is the gift of

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the Afropessimism and Afrofuturism embedded in the climate justice movement: instead of simply fighting to protect the world that we already have, a lie that we could never afford to believe in, we are able to struggle to create the world that we don't have. So I ask again, the end of the world... for whom?

Photos from the Climate Justice Youth Summit, 2019, Brooklyn, NY, by A.J. Hudson.



Local middle schoolers from across Brooklyn, preparing for the 2019 Climate Strike March. Brooklyn, NY, A. J. Hudson





Climate Strike March 2019 through DUMBO Brooklyn, A. J. Hudson



Climate Strike Youth Protest 2019, Brooklyn Bridge Park, A. J. Hudson