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After Apocalypse

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Does Hollywood *like* apocalypse?

What do you think of when you hear the word apocalypse? Hollywood science-fiction (sci-fi) movies like *2012* (2009) or *The Day After Tomorrow* (2002)? Regardless of what image comes to mind, it is safe to say that most consider apocalypse the end of the world. But what is it actually? April Anson (2017) points out that the apocalypse is derived from the Greek word “apokalypsis” meaning “something revealed or uncovered,” but the Hollywood genre of the apocalypse comes from Judeo-Christian biblical narratives of the revelation.¹

In recent times, this genre has taken the form of environmental apocalypse or climate-fiction (cli-fi)—a portmanteau of climate and science fiction—where the end of humanity is the result of global climate change.² Though this framing of environmental apocalypse as the end of the world is used to motivate change, the sense of impending doom can be rather paralyzing. As despair and fear filters through this genre so too does the erasure of Indigenous histories as post-apocalyptic, a term which Potawatomi scholar Kyle Whyte (2017) uses to highlight how “colonially-induced environmental changes altered the ecological conditions that supported Indigenous Peoples’ cultures, health, economies, and political self-determination.”³ The genre of environmental apocalypse, then, is indeed settler-colonial and leaves out missing histories. But what if apocalypse accounted for these histories and revealed something more than an end? What if apocalypse signalled hope that there will be a future?

Skawennati, *Falling Asleep*, 2016. machinimagraph Collection of AbTeC.
Photo credit: artist's website. <http://www.skawennati.com/SheFallsForAges/index.html>

The Haudenosaunee creation story re-told by Mohawk/Anishinaabe scholar Vanessa Watts (2013) offers an answer to these questions:

According to Haudenosaunee, Sky Woman fell from a hole in the sky... On her descent, Sky Woman fell through the clouds and air towards water below. During her descent, birds could see this falling creature and saw she could not fly. They came to her and helped to lower her slowly to waters beneath her. The birds told Turtle that she must need a place to land, as she possessed no water legs. Turtle rose up, breaking through the surface so that Sky Woman could land on Turtle's back. Once landed, Sky Woman and Turtle began to form the earth, the land becoming an extension of their bodies.⁴

While Watts writes out this story in a few sentences, she points out that Indigenous creation stories like these can often take a few days to tell and can take many different forms.⁵ John Mohawk, for instance, fills an entire book with a literary re-telling of the traditional creation story beginning in the celestial planet of Skyworld.⁶

In *She Falls for Ages* (2017), Mohawk artist Skawennati not only re-tells the creation story of Turtle Island, but she also reimagines it as a *machinima*—a movie, typically produced using video-game software, without conventional cinematography. In my interview with Skawennati, I learned that she used the machinima to offer her own interpretation and perspective of the creation story, drawing on her own

life as a Mohawk woman.⁷ Throughout this essay, I continue to draw on my interview with Skawennati to demonstrate my learning process as I wrote this essay, as well as to highlight the particular place and community from which the creation story arises.⁸ Recording in the video-game platform *Second Life* and using digitally created avatars, Skawennati revises Sky World as a futurist past and re-presents Sky Woman as an empowered protagonist who actively secures a new future for her people after their planet's life comes to an end. Through the machinima, Skawennati transforms an oral story about Turtle Island's past to project a future void of erasure, full of hope, and a way to contend with the passing of a world.

Future after the anthropocene apocalypse?

Indigenous futurism was first outlined by Anishinaabe scholar Grace Dillon, who called for Indigenous people to adopt the tools of science fiction to reimagine their futures.⁹ Settler scholar Suzanne Newman Fricke outlines that Indigenous futurist practices are a move away from colonialism or even to a time and space where colonialism has not happened.¹⁰ Indigenous Futurism, however, is not necessarily about the future; it can revisit the past or touch upon a timeline outside of our own.¹¹ Through these non-linear temporal explorations, Indigenous futurism resists what settler scholar Mark Rifkin calls “settler time”: linear temporal experiences and the “orderings, articulations and reckonings of time” that decide what does and does not happen.¹²

She Falls for Ages revisits the creation story of Turtle Island, a part of Haudenosaunee past and a time and space where colonialism did not exist, resisting settler-time which would typically ignore this creation story as part of Turtle Island's history. While Skawennati's machinima and practice is considered Indigenous futurist practice, Mohawk activist Ellen Gabriel asserts that “, our people have always used time travel to figure out the problems of today,” thus confirming non-linear temporal traditions within Haudenosaunee culture.¹³ Taking this into consideration, I explore how the non-linear temporal exploration into the creation story in *She Falls for Ages* moves away from typically whitewashed and settler-colonial narratives of environmental apocalypse and the Anthropocene.

In this paper, whitewashing refers to a centering of white life and White people, disregarding Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) communities.¹⁴ I also draw from Unangax scholar Eve Tuck and K. W. Yang's (2012) definition of settler-colonialism—a form of colonialism that insists on settler sovereignty, settler ideologies and settler homemaking.¹⁵

This paper considers the anthropocene as working in tandem with discourses around environmental apocalypse. I draw primarily on white settler scholar Heather Davis and Métis anthropologist Zoe Todd, who offer a decolonized conceptualization of the Anthropocene and climate changes as produced by colonial and capitalist systems of power. Some definitions of the Anthropocene attribute the geological epoch to environmental changes to all human activity, but Davis and Todd point out that this does not address the fact that colonialism and capitalist corporations have exploited and extracted resources from the Earth which is what has resulted in the so-called Anthropocene.¹⁶

Other scholars working on decolonizing the Anthropocene include Potawatomi scholar Kyle Powys Whyte, who further argues that the Anthropocene is an extension of the colonialism that Indigenous communities have been and continue to be facing. He argues that Indigenous groups have already experienced an environmental apocalypse, and that renewing Indigenous knowledges can help to mitigate climate issues in the future, as well as strengthen Indigenous communities.¹⁷ Skawennati's machinima demonstrates an example when environmental apocalypse occurs and Haudenosaunee knowledge, through the creation story, helps Sky Woman's community to cope and imagine a new kind of future.

Matt Damon doesn't save this planet...

As Black futurist and activist Adrienne Maree Brown writes, the future of the world is usually constructed within a hero narrative where one person, “often one white man, often Matt Damon,” saves the world (2017).¹⁸ Brown is likely referring to the many sci-fis and cli-fis starring white men, whose actions are crucial to securing the future of humanity, including: *Interstellar* (2014) starring Matthew McConaughey, *The Day After Tomorrow* (2002) starring Dennis Quaid (2004), *Avatar* (2009) starring Sam Worthington, and so forth.

A major consequence of using the white male protagonist is that these narratives focus on saving the future to prevent “white decline,” resulting in the erasure of BIPOC communities.¹⁹ For example, in the blockbuster sci-fi *Avatar*, the white male protagonist, Jake, is framed as saving the fictional Na’vi people when he acts to defend their sacred site, a tree on their planet of Pandora. The story in this film does not focus on the society, people, and culture itself, but rather it is centred on the way that Jake moves throughout Na’vi society in his digitally created avatar to eventually save them, whitewashing the overall narrative.

James Cameron (Director), *Avatar*, 2009, screenshot from film. 20th Century Fox.

Indigenous artists and writers avoid this erasure by empowering their own protagonists to address the challenges that arise from climate change.²⁰ In my interview with Skawennati, she describes that in some versions of the creation story that she heard, Sky Woman's past is not clearly articulated, and she is usually depicted as accidentally falling down the hole. To reconcile this, Skawennati re-imagines Sky Woman in *She Falls for Ages* as an empowered protagonist who makes the conscious decision to jump into the hole where the tree has been uprooted to secure a future for her people.

The empowered protagonist is established in many ways, but particularly from Skawennati's own experiences as a Mohawk woman and her re-imagining of Sky Woman's past as a young telepath named Otsitsakaion. In the machinima and creation story, Otsitsakaion must learn how to master her telepathic abilities with her uncle's guidance. In the machinima, when Otsitsakaion masters her telepathy, she can use her abilities in ways she sees fit. Eventually, her telepathy becomes integral for her to read her partner and the guardian of the celestial tree's psychic prediction of the world's end, where she sees herself jumping into the sky to save her people. When Otsitsakaion sees the psychic vision, she says, "I saw it too, and I know what must be done," demonstrating a strong sense of her role as Sky Woman.

Skawennati, *Telepath (Otsitsakaion Drawing)*, 2016. machinimagraph. Collection of AbTeC.
Photo credit: artist's website. <http://www.skawennati.com/SheFallsForAges/index.html>

Mohawk scholar Wahsontiio Cross²¹ (2019) confirms that this clear articulation of Otsitsakaion's role is part of Haudenosaunee culture, where individuals are considered to have their own unique roles and purposes within their society.²² At the same time, Skawennati draws on the Haudenosaunee matrilineal tradition by presenting a pregnant Sky Woman and her baby as seeds, both planted by Sky Woman herself as the seeds of the new world. What distinguishes Skawennati's depiction of Sky Woman, though, is her inspiration from the mohawk women she knows to reimagine Otsitsakaion as having the courage to intentionally take on a daunting task.²³ In this way, Skawennati's depiction of Sky Woman reckons with the past, present and future all at once, where Sky Woman's decision to establish a future for her people becomes known through a voyage into her past as a young telepath, as well as inspiration from Skawennati's presence as a Mohawk futurist.

The Day After Tomorrow: There is a Tomorrow

Of course, mainstream narratives of the apocalypse take inspiration from the Judeo-Christian biblical stories of The Last Judgement or the Genesis Flood story. Consider, for example, the 2002 film *The Day After Tomorrow*, a cli-fi starring a white male protagonist who confronts environmental apocalypse. *The Day After Tomorrow* depicts Jack Hall, a paleoclimatologist, who attempts to warn the president of the United States that the earth is and will see massive environmental changes and eventual doom. Though the movie documents climate disasters across the world, what symbolizes the apocalypse is a great flood that overcomes New York state, reminiscent of the Genesis flood story, colloquially known as Noah's Ark. In this story, Noah receives a revelation from God that he must build an ark to survive a catastrophic flood and preserve the future of humanity.

Roland Emmerich (Director), *The Day After Tomorrow*, 2012. Screenshots from film. Lionsgate Films.

Skawennati, *Celestial Tree*, 2016. machinimagraph. Collection of AbTeC.
Photo credit: artist's website. <http://www.skawennati.com/SheFallsForAges/index.html>

Multiple problematic images are apparent in *The Day After Tomorrow*: first and foremost, the movie's appropriation of a biblical narrative to ultimately motivate actions against climate change; and secondly, the linear timeline of apocalypse. Cherokee and Greek Scholar Thomas King points out that there are similarities between Judeo-Christian creation stories and Indigenous ones, but I argue that the images of doom and an end associated with cli-fis like *The Day After Tomorrow* have appropriated those biblical stories through a settler-colonial and whitewashed timeline of apocalypse.²⁴

Operating from an Indigenous Futurist practice, *She Falls for Ages* shows Sky World as a futurist planet with advanced technology, especially through the celestial tree. Traditionally in the creation story, the celestial tree is full of abundant fruits and blossoms, symbolizing life on Sky World. Cross also explains that the celestial tree is symbolic, too, of the Haudenosaunee tree of peace, "a white pine under which the nations of the Haudenosaunee confederacy buried the weapons as a symbol of peace."²⁵

The celestial tree, then, not only symbolizes life, but it has significant value as a motif from deep within Haudenosaunee past. Taking inspiration from this, Skawennati explains that the celestial tree in *She Falls for Ages* not only symbolizes life, but technological and cultural advancement itself—the tree's blossoms are lit through its bright colours and the powers of Skyworld.²⁶ This futurist design of both Skyworld and the celestial tree blends together parts of the past with a futurist aesthetic, configuring the Haudenosaunee creation story as a futurist past.²⁷ During my interview, Skawennati described the importance of this non-linear temporality quite beautifully when she said:

Maybe when [Sky Woman] gets here[...] it's a new beginning and it seems at an earlier stage of development than her home, so I can imagine her wanting to influence that place to be more like the place that she left [...There is] a desire and a feeling that there is something to work towards[...] that maybe we will eventually go [back] to that place.²⁸

As Whyte highlights, Indigenous artists and futurists do not always share the same dystopic or apocalyptic vision of popular sci-fi as impending doom.²⁹ Instead, artists and futurists engage in counterfactual speculation that asks how ancestors and future generations would interpret the situations that result from environmental disaster, evident in Skawennati's machinima where the artist herself speculated about the creation story's lessons about the end of a world and Sky Woman's own desires.³⁰ I argue that this speculation about the past resists dread and fear, instead offering a sense of hope for the possibilities of a new future that takes from the lessons of the past.

One could easily wonder why Skyworld came to an end if it was as technologically advanced as Skawennati shows it. When asked about this, she answered that she purposefully created a world that is dying despite its sustainability and technologies to show that *death* happens—thus, reimagining apocalypse as something to accept and move forward from into the future.³¹ This is exemplified in the machinima when one of the elders acknowledges both the fears and acceptance of their world's ultimate death as he says, "the realization of our greatest fear is upon us: our world is dying. We, the circle of elders, have created this ceremony of renewal to ease the passing of this world into a new one."³² While in other films, apocalypse is considered an end of time or space, the machinima shows death as a possible beginning towards a new future—the beginning of a new time.

Art of the Anthropocene: Towards “something else”

The Anthropocene typically refers to the current geological era where human activity has altered the earth’s environment and climate; however, as mentioned earlier, Davis and Todd call for a decolonization of the Anthropocene that links the beginning of the era to the beginning of settler-colonialism. For Todd, an effective art of the Anthropocene “is one that directly engages with the structural violence of heteropatriarchy and white supremacy as they shape discourse and praxis.”³³ *She Falls for Ages* can be considered an effective art of the Anthropocene because it draws on Skawennati’s Kanien’kehá: ka (Mohawk) knowledge, as well as matrilineal traditions and Haudenosaunee aesthetics, symbols, and the creation story. In doing so, it moves away from White supremacy and heteropatriarchy in cli-fis. The machinima is not simply a counternarrative to Hollywood cli-fis and sci-fis but an intervention into Euro-Western thinking focused on impending doom that erases Indigenous ways of knowing and living.³⁴ *She Falls for Ages*, then, envisions a hopeful future that will manifest despite the challenge and changes of apocalypse. Most of all, it offers a new way to think about changes from environmental apocalypse not as impending doom, but as a new world full of possibilities.

Endnotes

- 1 April Anson, "American apocalypse: The whitewashing genre of settler colonialism," *Academia Edu* (2017): 6. https://www.academia.edu/34949190/American_Apocalypse_The_Whitewashing_Genre_of_Settler_Colonialism.
- 2 Ibid, 8.
- 3 Kyle Whyte, "Indigenous Climate Change Studies: Indigenizing Futures, Decolonizing the Anthropocene." *English Language Notes* 55, no. 1 (2017): 154. muse.jhu.edu/article/711473.
- 4 Vanessa Watts, "Indigenous Place-Thought and Agency Amongst Humans and Non-Humans (First Woman and Sky Woman Go on a European World Tour!)," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 2, no. 1 (2013): 21. <http://decolonization.org/index.php/des/article/view/19145>.
- 5 Ibid, 21.
- 6 John Mohawk, *Iroquois Creation Story: John Arthur Gibson and J.N.B. Hewitt's Myth of the Earth Grasper* (Buffalo: Mohawk Publications, 2005).
- 7 Skawennati (artist), in discussion with the author, November 2020.
- 8 This essay would not have been written without Skawennati's generous support and time in the form of an interview. Niá:wen, Skawennati.
- 9 Grace Dillon, *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2012), 1.
- 10 Suzanne N. Fricke, "Introduction: Indigenous Futurisms in the hyperpresent now," *World Art* 9, no. 2 (2019): 110. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21500894.2019.1627674>.
- 11 Fricke, 114.
- 12 Mark Rifkin, "One: Indigenous Orientations," in *Beyond Settler Time: Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination*, ed. Mark Rifkin, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 3, 5.
- 13 Ellen Gabriel quoted in Alice Ming Wai Jim, "Technologies of Self-Fashioning: Virtual Ethnicities in New Media Art," *Disruptions: Proceedings of the 21st International Symposium on Electronic Art (ISEA)*, Simon Fraser University, Vancouver (2015), 4.
- 14 Mabel Gergan and Sara Smith and Pavithra Vasudevan, "Earth beyond repair: Race and apocalypse in collective imagination," *Society and Space* 38, no. 1: 93. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775818756079>.
- 15 Eve Tuck and K W. Yang, "Decolonization is not a metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 5. <https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/des/article/view/18630>.
- 16 Heather Davis and Zoe Todd, "On the Importance of a Date, or, Decolonizing the Anthropocene," *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 16, no.4 (2017): 764. <https://acme-journal.org/index.php/acme/article/view/1539/1303>
- 17 Kyle Whyte "Indigenous Climate Change Studies: Indigenizing Futures, Decolonizing the Anthropocene," *English Language Notes* 55, no. 1 (2017): 153-162. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/711473>.
- 18 adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (AK Press, 2017).
- 19 Mable Gergan and Sara Smith, and Vasudevan, 94.
- 20 Kyle Whyte, "Indigenous science (fiction) for the Anthropocene: Ancestral dystopias and fantasies of climate change crises," *Sage* 1, no. 1-2 (2018): 224. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2514848618777621>.
- 21 Wahsontio Cross writes about this in the exhibition catalogue for Skawennati's retrospective exhibition, *From Skyworld to Cyberspace* (2019). I have paraphrased part of her writing, but I include the quotation here for clarification: "...but it [She Falls for Ages] also reminds us that, though we are linked, we as individuals have our own unique roles in our society and culture. The Creator gives each of us a gift, a purpose in this world. Like Ositsakaoin and Tehahontsi'tsonkwa in the Creation Story, these gifts are to be planted during childhood and cultivated with the help of elder mentors (like uncle) so that we may better understand and use those gifts during childhood" (p. 38).

- 22 Wahsontiio Cross, "The Power of Creation: Skawennati, Cyberspace, and the Transmission of Haudenosaunee Knowledge" in *Skawennati: From Skyworld to Cyberspace* (London, Ontario: McIntosh Gallery, 2019), 38.
- 23 Skawennati (artist), in discussion with the author, November 2020.
- 24 Thomas King, *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2003).
- 25 Cross, 38.
- 26 Skawennati (artist), in discussion with the author, November 2020.
- 27 Grace Dillon, "Native Slipstream," in *The Fictions of Stephen Graham: A Critical Companion*, ed. Stephen Graham, (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2016), 345.
- 28 Skawennati (artist), in discussion with the author, November 2020.
- 29 Whyte, 2018, 226.
- 30 Ibid, 229.
- 31 Skawennati (artist), in discussion with the author, November 2020.
- 32 Skawennati, *She Falls For Ages*, 2017.
- 33 Todd, "Indigenizing the Anthropocene," 243.
- 34 Todd, 248.

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