

A VIEW FROM THE FUTURE

Activist Artists, Writers, and Filmmakers Turn to Science Fiction to Address the Climate Crisis

Lisa E. Bloom

This essay focuses on the role of artistic and literary imagination in expanding how we understand the climate crisis by foregrounding global warming's entwinement with other pressing issues of our time—including gender, race, and colonialism. It extends current visual culture and environmental humanities scholarship on global warming that is rewriting and expanding the scope of art history.¹ Writing from an intersectional feminist perspective, I call attention to the work of activist artists, writers, and filmmakers who use strategies of science fiction while incorporating scientific fact to link climate change to its social roots in fossil-fuel capitalism. In their creations, these artists, writers, and filmmakers reframe the climate crisis, provide generative art, video, and writing practices that identify and bring into being hidden realities and spark alternative futures that influence humanity's non-fictional one.

First, I will discuss the importance of the terms Anthropocene, Capitalocene, and Chthulucene, words that refer to the current geological period identified by its unprecedented human environmental impact on a global scale and its consequences in the present moment. Following a discussion of terminology, I will examine the experimental speculative science fiction book written jointly by renowned science studies scholars, Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway, titled *The Collapse of Western Civilization: A View from the Future* (2014). The book constructs a vision of the future with an informed consideration of the failures of politicians, governments, scientists, and corporations to respond to anthropogenic climate change. Recent videos and artworks by Molly Crabtree and the writer and activist Naomi Klein (et al.) *Message from the Future with Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez* (2019) and *Message from the Future 2: The Years of Repair* (2020), inspire us to interrogate the futures we are creating and enable us to imagine other ways societies can come together around an understanding of a shared crisis. The role of expression, especially handmade, is especially important since the artwork of Mollie Crabapple turns a realist hand-drawn aesthetic combined with animation into a popular form of dissent accessible to millions of viewers. Drawing on a longer history of figurative painting, social realist art, caricature, and cartooning, Crabapple's handmade aesthetic connects this essay to a wider group of artists who similarly use drawing and media as a device for activism.²

I conclude by analyzing the new crises created by both climate change and COVID-19 together in the context of ongoing political threats posed by surging white supremacist

movements, resurgent nativism, science-bashing, and anti-democratic policies. All the artists, filmmakers, and writers discussed in this essay view these concerns as intertwined with and exacerbated by the climate crisis and consider science fiction as part of their activist strategy.

To better understand the Anthropocene, Capitalocene, and the Chtulucene, artists, filmmakers, activists, and scholars turn to speculative fiction and science fiction as the impact of climate breakdown comes to be felt everywhere and examine the way the present crises do not feel far from fiction. Many of us can now relate to the uncanniness and feelings of estrangement caused by the climate crisis that pervade the circumstances of our own collective lives. In my case, on September 9, 2020, in Berkeley, California, where I live, I woke up to orange skies caused by the smoke from countless wildfires mixed with clouds and fog from the West Coast's worst fire season. I immediately took a photograph to document my direct sense of emotional distress that morning. The ominous effect from the orange haze that day more closely resembled a scene from the 1982 science fiction film *Blade Runner* by Ridley Scott set in 2049. Or, as one reporter put it, the orange glow seemed more "like a scene from Mars," than the world that is familiar to us.³

One year earlier, in the fall of 2019 during fire season, I saw on my Facebook feed a photograph of a large sign hanging in the window of a bookstore window where one usually sees the usual layout of books that read: "Please note: the post-apocalyptic fiction section has been moved to Current Affairs" (Figure 21.1).



Figure 21.1 A large sign hanging in the window of a bookstore window where one usually sees the usual layout of books that reads: "Please Note: the Post-Apocalyptic Fiction Section Has Been Moved to Current Affairs." Photograph by author

It is a particularly apt way to express the new strangeness that pervades our everyday life now that my community has faced devastating wildfire seasons every year for the past three years. The sign that circulated widely online and became a meme that also appeared in the window of many bookstores across the U.S. suggests that the future is already upon us. It is worth noting that none of the art, films, or texts that I present in this essay suggest that a dystopian future is inevitable. Rather, each understands the seriousness of what lies ahead. Oreskes and Conway write about the present in the past tense, which makes their account all the more disturbing. *Message From the Future I and II* create a future that is genuinely better than our present to examine how the feminist utopian imagination could help us take action in the present. In what follows I present the potentiality of artistic and literary work as critical interventions to these ongoing problems. I contend that such scholars, artists, and activists who confront inequality, legacies of historical injustices, and the ongoing destruction of nature remain uniquely poised to articulate the complexity of the material and representational aspects of climate breakdown as crises continue to accumulate at an alarming rate.

Politics of the Anthropocene and Capitalocene

This essay considers ways that art, literature, and media have both shaped and been shaped by ideas and debates about gender, colonialism, and fossil-fuel capitalism. This, in turn, influences in unexpected ways how we think about nature, landscape, and the environment in the era of the Anthropocene, or as some might prefer, the Capitalocene or Chtulucene, within which we now find ourselves. Throughout the essay I use the term Anthropocene, which refers to our current geological period characterized by ecosystem failures, rising sea levels, and climate-led migrations, but place the term within a discourse of the environmental humanities and arts rather than the natural sciences.⁴ The term was first developed by the late Eugene Stoermer, a pioneer in the field of freshwater ecology, and refined by Paul Crutzen, Nobel laureate and chemist. The concept was introduced in 2000 to name earth's new geological epoch which they identified by its unprecedented human environmental impact on a global scale dating from the beginning of the industrial revolution in the late eighteenth century. They cited evidence in support of how humans became climatic and geological forces behind planetary transformations even of the earth's most basic structures, including its atmosphere, the melting of the polar ice caps, and the rising of the oceans from global warming.

Though experts tend to agree that the term Anthropocene denotes the period in which the surface of the Earth has been indelibly changed by humans and that the rate of change is speeding up at alarming rates, there is also wide disagreement on when it began, and whether it should be named the "Age of Man," among other issues.⁵ Humanities scholars who specialize in tracing differences between moments of time, communities, cultures and aesthetic forms are critical of the term because it makes the human species at large the agent of history, and in so doing lumps all humans together into the "Age of Man" that unfolds over 10,000 years but only leads to enormous change in CO₂ in the past 200.

The term Anthropocene itself is seen as problematic because it fails to challenge the inequality and injustice of universalized projects of a seemingly homogenous Humanity/Man. Therefore, the term has been heavily critiqued for perpetuating such notions. For example, Indigenous scholar Zoe Todd, in collaboration with Heather Davis, argues "that the Anthropocene is a continuation of dispossession and genocide coupled with a transformation of the environment and ... should be dated from the time of colonization to provide a basis for the possibility of decolonization within this framework."⁶ For many Indigenous peoples,

climate injustice does not involve, simply an ‘age of the human’ dated to industrial development....[it] emerges as an issue more recently that is part of a cyclical history of disruptive anthropogenic environmental change caused by settler and other colonial institutions that paved the way for extractive industries and deforestation.⁷

Feminist scholars such as Anna L. Tsing rebuke the progressivist narrative of Man’s cognitive ascent, pointing out that “women and men from around the world have clamored to be included in the status once given to Man. Our riotous presence undermines the moral intentionality of Man’s Christian masculinity, which separated Man from Nature.”⁸ In the context of this essay on art and climate change activism, I use aspects of the term for the way it situates humans as part of nature, and not separate from it, and for the way it looks beyond conventional art and humanities frameworks to reframe our understanding of human agency not only toward our own species, but toward the whole planet. In doing so, the term challenges mainstream understanding of contemporary culture.

Although I use the term Anthropocene, I also find the various alternatives useful in thinking specifically about the non-human and territorial corporate expansion and its ongoing competition over natural resources. Andreas Malm’s concept of the Capitalocene that was further developed by Jason Moore and Donna Haraway is a more pointed supplement to the term Anthropocene.⁹ Moore’s notion of “cheap nature” is an important economics-based concept describing the vision of nature both produced by and underlying the drive to despoil the earth for endless profit.¹⁰ Whereas the Capitalocene replaces the Anthropocene’s focus on human-based activities as the central driver of Earth’s natural systems with political economy, Donna Haraway extends both terms to address the non-human to reframe the crisis in her use of terms such as the Chthulucene. For Haraway, the Chthulucene is an era (with no time nor history) in which the human race will confront its arrogance and superiority and humbly make kin with biological beings coming from below the ground. She thus widens our imagination to think more about the entangled ecological dimension and embraces more experimental speculative approaches (including science fiction) as a way to bring into being an inclusive cultural engagement with a changing multispecies world and realms beyond the human.¹¹ The terms Capitalocene and Chthulucene are significant to the feminist intersectional approach that I take in this essay to confront a crisis that transcends the merely environmental, combines the human to the non-human, and reflects the terrifying global scale of the threat and its unprecedented social and economic breadth and depth.

Naomi Oreskes and Eric Conway: *The Collapse of Western Civilization*

The Collapse of Western Civilization is a 104 page short science fiction book set in the year 2393 when the world is almost unrecognizable from climate catastrophe. The warnings from the climate crisis were mostly ignored and there is widespread environmental destruction with few survivors. One of them is the narrator of the book, a senior scholar writing from the Second People’s Republic of China on the 300th anniversary of the Great Collapse, when the disintegration of the West Antarctic Ice sheet led to Mass Migration, a complete change in the global order. Written for a general audience, the book presents a valuable social-scientific perspective on the climate crisis in the unexpected genre of science fiction and contributes to understanding the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene. The authors Naomi Oreskes and Eric Conway are well known academics: Oreskes is Professor of the History of Science and Affiliated Professor of Earth and Planetary Sciences at Harvard University, and Eric Conway is the historian at NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory at the California Institute

of Technology in Pasadena, California. In writing this book together, they were influenced by the well-known science fiction writer, Kim Stanley Robinson, whose “Science and the Capital” trilogy are written in a realist vein, and are closely based on science.¹² The authors explain in an interview that they turned to science fiction because they were hitting up against the limits of their own academic profession. They write:

History tends to be skewed towards topics and people who have left extensive and open records. Historians also have to stay close to their source material, which sometimes gets in the way of telling a good story. Fiction gives you more latitude, but always with the goal of being true to the facts: true to what science tells us could really happen if we continue with business as usual, and true to what history suggests is plausible. Nothing is invented in the book out of whole cloth.¹³

In the book, the world seems to recognize the climate crisis early on and took steps to negotiate and implement a solution. But before the movement to change took hold, there was a ferocious backlash. As in the non-fictional world, the climate deniers in the book claimed that the uncertainties were too great to justify the expense and inconvenience of eliminating greenhouse gas emissions, and that any attempt to solve the problem would cost more than it was worth. Even though just a handful of people made this argument, almost all of them were from the U.S. In the end it was other countries like China that took the lead but failed to force the U.S. into international cooperation. Other nations also used inertia in the U.S. to excuse their own patterns of destructive development.

The book constructs an imaginary future in order to understand the present. It provides a plausible intellectual history of Western civilization up to its final collapse, from 1540 to 2093. Oreskes and Conway chose 1540 as the starting date because it coincides with Georg Joachim Rheticus’ *Narratio Prima* that was written as the introduction to Copernicus’ book on the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres in 1543. As historians of science, this date was important to Oreskes and Conway as marking the beginning of the scientific revolution. The choice of 2093 as the end date was more arbitrary. They chose it since it seemed far enough in the future that the rise in sea levels at that point would be considerable according to estimates from climate scientists in 2014 when the book was written.¹⁴

The Collapse of Western Civilization offers a viewpoint from the future, since it is written from the vantage point of 2393, on the three hundred anniversary of the Great Collapse. The book’s messenger is an unnamed future historian living in the Second People’s Republic of China, looking back on the past, recounting the events of what the authors call the Period of the Penumbra (1988–2093) that led to the Great Collapse and Mass Migration (2073–2093). Oreskes and Conway invent critical words such as “Penumbral Period,” and even create an index for what they call their “Lexicon of Archaic Words.” It is a grim period. They write:

The Penumbral Period is the shadow of anti-intellectualism that fell over the once Enlightened techno-scientific nations of the Western world, during the second half of the twentieth century. Anti-intellectualism prevented them from acting on scientific knowledge available at the time and condemning their successors to the inundation and desertification of the late twenty-first and twenty-second century.¹⁵

The cultural and historical background of the narrator is not specified in the text, but the book seems to be a foil onto which the current research of U.S. historians of science of the early twenty-first century is projected. We can see this in statements from the book

when they write in the past tense that their civilization was unable to take the most basic steps to prevent a future that includes widespread starvation, pandemics, displacement, and pestilence. They write: “The consequences of [our] actions were not only predictable but predicted...The people of Western civilization knew what was happening to them but were unable to stop it...Knowledge did not translate into power.”¹⁶

One of the central ironies of the book is that the freedoms enjoyed in modern Western civilization were destroyed by failure to prevent catastrophic climate change, a failure caused in large part by those neoliberals, conservatives, and libertarians who placed personal freedom (and hence anti-government laissez-faire capitalism) above all other values. The author denounces the fixation on “free” markets, what I refer to earlier as the Capitalocene. They also point out that the scientists who are coming out of the Enlightenment tradition were to blame because they had an excessively stringent standard for accepting claims of any kind, what is called the 95% confidence limit. The 95% confidence limit created a huge hurdle for the recommendation and implementation of any kind of public policy or action.

The unnamed historian writing in 2393 identifies some remarkable parallels between the climate change debate and earlier controversies over tobacco smoking, acid rain, and the hole in the ozone layer, explaining that spreading doubt and confusion was the basic strategy of those opposing action in each case. In particular, a few contrarian scientists joined forces with conservative think tanks and private corporations to challenge the scientific consensus on many contemporary issues. The same argument also appears in Oreskes and Conway’s non-fictional book titled *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming* (2010) that inspired the film *Merchants of Doubt* released in 2015.¹⁷

The Collapse of Western Civilization was published in 2014 and in a way anticipated the rise of the far right around the world and the rise of pandemics that I will discuss in the next section. Professors Oreskes and Conway reach the same conclusion as the writer and journalist Naomi Klein does in her 2014 book, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*. Her thesis: “We have not done the things that are necessary to lower emissions because those things fundamentally conflict with deregulated capitalism, the reigning ideology for the entire period we have been struggling to find a way out of this crisis. But change must come quickly.”¹⁸ By 2023, Klein points out that we’ll be lucky to restrict the ultimate rise in global temperatures to an average of four degrees Celsius, or seven Fahrenheit. Four degrees warming, as it turns out, is the premise for the nightmarish future described by Professors Oreskes and Conway. This is why, of the paths put forward by these different books written in the same year, *The Collapse of Western Civilization* does not appear far from Klein’s non-fiction with its premise that a market-based, neoliberal political, and economic regime will have trouble acting with long-term caution.

Molly Crabapple, Naomi Klien and Avi Lewis: *A Message from the Future with Alexandria Ocasio Cortez*

Like Professors Oreskes and Conway, Naomi Klein also turns to science fiction later in 2019 to reach a wider audience for climate activism. Energized by the belief that societies can be rebuilt in more just ways, Klein in collaboration with artist Molly Crabapple, filmmaker Avi Lewis, writer-politician Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and directors Kim Boekbinder and Jim Batt produced the short seven-minute animated film *A Message from the Future with Alexandria Ocasio Cortez* in 2019 that garnered 2 million views within 8 hours of being posted on the site of the online journal *The Intercept*. The premise of the film, Naomi Klein writes, is

straightforward: “Set a couple of decades from now, the short online video is a flat-out rejection of the idea that a dystopian future is a foregone conclusion. Instead, it offers a thought experiment: What if we decided **not** to drive off the climate cliff? What if we chose to radically change course and save both our habitat and ourselves?”¹⁹

The film envisions a world that we would like to see become reality, along with policies that will be needed to take us there. That is why it frames what Rob Nixon calls the “slow violence” of climate change not as some distant threat but rather as a creeping violence that has already entered the present, creating harm on ecosystems and vulnerable communities in the here and now. Slow violence for Nixon provokes us to expand our imaginations of what constitutes harm. He asserts that environmental degradation “occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space.”²⁰ He insists we take seriously the forms of violence that have become unmoored from their original causes, from gradually acidifying oceans, to the incremental horrors of climate change.

A series of sudden climate disasters in real life, including Hurricane Sandy in New York (2012) and Hurricane Maria (2017), provided the catalyst for the film creators to take such “slow violence” seriously and imagine what a future U.S. society could look like decades later if the Green New Deal, the U.S. legislation proposed in 2019, was introduced that tackled both climate change and economic inequality. The creators of the film realized that the biggest challenge to implementing the transformative change offered by the Green New Deal (modeled on the New Deal that came out in the 1930s) is to overcome widespread skepticism that humanity could ever carry out something so costly at the scale and speed needed.

Time-lapse footage shows the hands of artist Molly Crabapple who has created a unique approach and a new role for herself as “a political-journalist-artist.” Previously known for sketching from the front lines of conflicts in the U.S. and around the world, Crabapple does not simply paint images of the future through rose-tinted glasses. Rather, she acknowledges that calamities will still occur, even if major reforms are implemented.²¹ Using drawing together with animation as a device for activism, the viewer witnesses through Crabapple’s sketches a humble, recognizable vision of a livable future made possible by the Green New Deal. In the film, Representative Ocasio-Cortez speaks from a moment in the future when her new climate policy has been implemented, saying how implausible this political and economic transformation seemed in our present, compared to how its goals—massive public investment in clean energy, universal healthcare, secure clean air and water—have become the new normal in the fictional future. To make this happen the film enables us to imagine a new wave of politicians of real young girls depicted in Crabapple’s drawing now entering politics in this fictional future world inspired by the wave of progressive women of color elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 2018 also depicted standing in front of the U.S. Capitol Building. Crabapple’s animated drawing titled “You Can’t be What You Can’t See” emphasizes young adults appearing in imagery not as passive victims of impending disaster, but as active, empowered participants in collective struggle for their own future (Figure 21.2).

Much of this film was conceived shortly after the activist Sunrise Movement and the multi-racial group of children and youth involved in the Bay Area’s Youth vs. Apocalypse organization showed up at the San Francisco Office of Democratic Senator Dianne Feinstein in early 2019 to urge her to vote for the Green New Deal. The Sunrise Movement on Twitter described Feinstein at the meeting as reacting “with smugness + disrespect. This is a fight for our generation’s survival. Her reaction is why young people desperately want new leadership in Congress.”²² A video of Feinstein’s treatment of the activists went viral, demonstrating the power of social media to expand the visibility of climate activism.²³ The challenge proposed

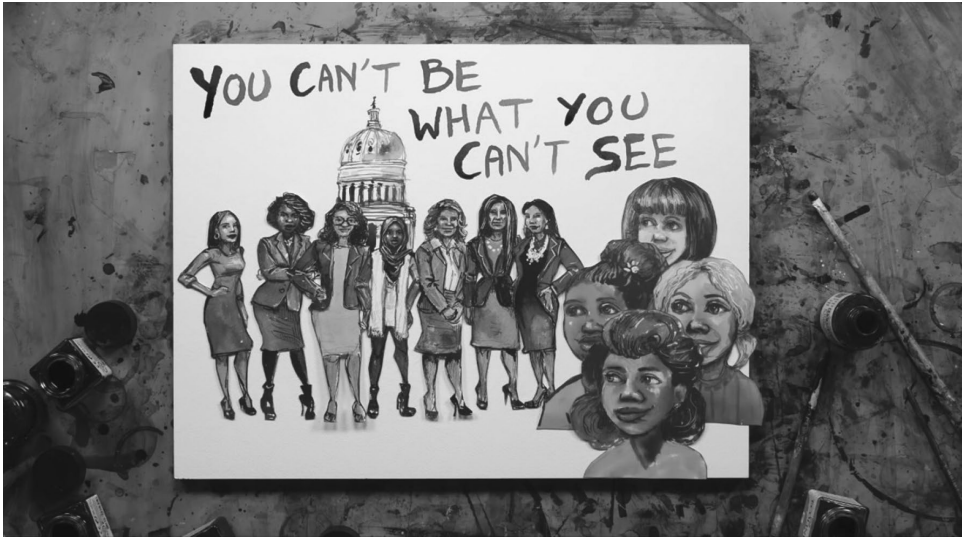


Figure 21.2 Molly Crabapple, “You Can’t be What You Can’t See,” Film Still from *A Message from the Future with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez*, 2019

by the children and youth was immediately picked up by Representative Ocasio-Cortez, a woman of Puerto-Rican descent who decided to run for Congress after participating in the Indigenous-led struggle at Standing Rock.²⁴ Throughout the film Crabapple paints actual children from Ocasio-Cortez’s multi-racial district in Queens, New York and puts them in the film as active participants in her message from the future. In the next image, an animated drawing by Crabapple of one girl in particular, Ileana, is presented in the near fictional future standing in a newly restored landscape, holding a shovel and wearing a hard hat in the foreground as she prepares to restore wetlands that appear in the background. Finis Dunaway perceptively points out in his article “Our House is on Fire” the significance of making a film with images of young activists like Ileana who are already participants in an increasingly intersectional climate movement. For Dunaway such an image of Ileana enables young activists to envision themselves as beneficiaries of a livable and more equitable future if major reforms are implemented. It is also significant for him as a means to challenge earlier conventional images of powerless and helpless children typically seen as innocent victims of global warming without agency in early mainstream ads and TV spots dating from the first decade of the twenty-first century.²⁵

Molly Crabapple and Naomi Klein: *A Message from the Future II: The Years of Repair*

After artist Molly Crabapple created the lively and compelling art in *A Message from the Future I*, she started painting portraits of essential workers and projecting them on the sides of buildings in New York City during COVID-19.²⁶ Her artistic work during COVID-19 was also the catalyst to create a second futurist film *Message from the Future II: The Years of Repair* in 2020.²⁷ The film was shaped by a contagious and deadly virus and a notion of what a human-to-human care response might look like, and what models might be invoked in the process. It is told from the perspective of a range of frontline organizations and activists who

speak about their experience with COVID-19, explaining to viewers that another world leading to a tangibly better life is possible and worth fighting for. This nine-minute film features a high-profile cast of international narrators from around the world, including Emma Thompson, Gael Garcia Bernal, Black Lives Matter co-founder Opal Tometi, and the Nigerian poet and activist Nnimmo Bassey.

Like the 2019 work discussed above, this new film enables us to imagine a future that escapes the grip of neoliberal capitalism and the despair that stems from the interconnected crises of climate destruction, and the ravages of the pandemic that exposed entrenched inequalities and injustices. Rather than present a narrative of how the climate crisis happened and the ways that people around the world ended up in a very dangerous place thanks to their politicians, governments, and corporations as discussed in Oreskes and Conway's book, this film presents the other side of the process: how societies can come together across racial, ethnic, religious, and gender divides based on their shared desire to stop the climate crisis rather than contribute further to carbon, pollution and wars. This better world is visualized as an animated drawing by Molly Crabapple from "The Years of Repair," depicting two workers of indeterminate genders, one brown and one white, hand in hand who walk together into a more just and resilient future where life is flourishing after the planet is healed from the progressive policies taken in the earlier film (Figure 21.3).

At the same time the film focuses on the future; it avoids the universalizing rhetoric of mainstream environmentalism which tends to hold everyone equally responsible for climate change as the term Anthropocene suggests. These activists focus instead on the power relations that have caused the crisis and the social inequalities that determine its uneven effects. COVID-19 acts as a magnifying lens to instruct humanity in a series of lessons about the



Figure 21.3 Molly Crabapple, "Years of Repair," Film Still from *A Message from the Future II*, 2020

Capitalocene and the way it compounds pre-existing crises organized around profit. The virus is shown as laying bare the depleted character of U.S. society that cut the public health infrastructure at a time of crisis to reveal how utterly disposable frontline workers truly are. At the same time, it emphasizes the life-saving and compassionate work that nurses, doctors, and other frontline workers are doing to keep us alive. A very moving set of animated drawings by Crabapple done for the film includes close-up images of the hands of actual front-line workers accompanied by the voice-over by the Nigerian poet Nnimmo Bassey to explain their significance: “The hands were all of us. We are entangled. Keeping each other alive. One of the lessons of COVID-19 was that the virus showed us what is truly essential.”

In the film, systemic racism and sexism is presented as an assault on the body. It includes images about the risks and deadly cruelty of sending human beings to do the most dangerous of jobs, including for-profit assisted living facilities, meatpacking plants and “fulfillment centers,” or warehousing them in prisons and immigrant detention houses. The voice-over points out that it is not only in these places where the virus spread like wildfire, but also where we were able to see the perfect storm of injustices baked into capitalism. In such sequences the film expands the meaning of Black Lives Matter by showing us how Black and brown women workers were in front-line jobs in disproportionate numbers, and consequently more vulnerable to infection and death. Whereas in the first film, *Message from the Future 1*, a politician, Alexandria-Ocasio-Cortez is the star, in the second film it is rank-and-file organizers and activists who rise up and topple the authoritarian rulers to create *The Years of Repair*. In both cases it is not one or two individual movements but a convergence of organized labor, climate, feminist, queer, Indigenous, and activists. In their collective work, the state that aligns itself with capitalism is not an ally but the target of their demands for universal health care, defunding the police, or introducing a sweeping Green New Deal.

The Years of Repair fittingly includes lessons about the essential labor that makes life possible and enjoyable has been so persistently undervalued. In the new future created by the film, the environmental ethics of “care” is a basic function that sustains life and grants us our common humanity, rather than positioned within capitalism where labor power depends on competition not collaboration and is only for profit.²⁸ Care is contextualized and not intentionally aligned with conventional gender roles nor united in an emphasis on a woman-nature affinity. Rather, as a nod to Donna Haraway’s Chthulucene, the new “care” workers in the “years of repair” are ironically referenced to include even “winged pollinators and the leafy oxygen makers” from the essential more-than-human world. The creators’ notion of care departs from the eco-maternalist ethos. It is not just a female prerogative in the face of masculinist science but a much wider concern of care enacted by anyone that exemplifies how to live, to care for others, and to enable life. That is why in the utopian future created by Klein and Crabapple, et al. putting in place social practices and new infrastructures necessary for all to live dignified lives is crucial: fully funding public schools so that bloated budgets for prisons are no longer needed; building a digital commons to “vaccinate” society against disinformation; dismantling the oil, coal, and gas industries and using their profits to clean up their mess; establishing a truth and reconciliation commission to address colonial violence and conquests of the past that shaped our world; and returning previous stolen land to the Indigenous people who will collaborate with others on saving a degraded planet.

In a piece Naomi Klein authored for the *Intercept* she writes that she and her co-creators searched for a unifying principle that could animate a future worth fighting for, and settled on *The Years of Repair*. As she writes:

The call to repair a deep brokenness is rooted in many radical and religious traditions. And it provides a framework expansive enough to connect the interlocking crises in our social, economic, political, information, and ecological spheres.²⁹

For Klein, who is one of the most articulate champions of the climate movement's history and drive, the year 2020 became an historic turning point for the world, one in which the lessons of COVID-19 and global uprisings against racism drive us to build a better society. The struggle ahead, according to Klein: "is going to be a long one, but its goal is simple, a world in which no one is sacrificed, and everyone is essential... And in these challenging times holding on to hope is in itself a form of resistance."³⁰

Conclusion

Given the assault on the environment and climate in the U.S. during the Trump Administration from 2016 to 2020 and the shocking mishandling of COVID-19 that sacrificed so many front line workers, it is more important than ever to put the interests of U.S. citizens and the planet above the abuses of a free-market ideology and the special corporate interests of board members and government officials, as we are facing an increasingly diminished future. Such work is especially necessary at a time when we are entering a moment of climate breakdown and our governments' and institutions' misguided policies, rather than stabilizing the global climate, are accelerating and intensifying these disastrous effects.

Aspects of climate aesthetics—ones that are activist, progressive, and earth-bound, including both human and non-human agencies impacted by extreme climate change—I argue, are crucial for a more vital cultural and political debate about art, nature, environment, and climate at a time when global humanity is facing multiple cultural and natural disasters. Crabapple, Ocasio-Cortez, Klein, et al. envision ways we can move forward and prevent such a dystopian future from happening by possessing the political heft to implement policies that address all the many facets of the crisis including the inequalities so we can build back better.

All three works use disasters such as the climate crisis and COVID-19 as a way to make visible the entwined crises and to show how they expose the world's vast inequalities and social injustices. Those disparities are part and parcel of structural inequities whose underlying racism and sexism in the U.S. were revealed from the beginnings of the pandemic: the police killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and so many others. George Floyd's emotional plea "I can't breathe," about the constricted air available from the policeman's chokehold that killed him, also resonates with the issue of environmental racism and raises wider questions about who is allowed to breathe and live where the air and water is not polluted from wild-fires and constant smoke. Forms of such slow violence create new ways of seeing, thinking, and writing to orient us and remind us how we are interconnected and dependent on each other. Set in the near and not so distant future, *The Collapse of Western Civilization: A View from the Future* advances a stern warning of what a dystopian future could look like if we do not act quickly to avert the worst. By contrast, the two films titled *A Message from the Future* (the first ended up being viewed more than 20 million times), present a more hopeful utopian future of a healed ecosystem at a markedly distressing political moment to help viewers envision what the world could be like if we have a bold climate mandate to remake and repair the world in-common.

For Crabtree et al., visualization is an essential part of their art practice which expresses their feminist anti-capitalist politics. Their artistic practice turns to the near future to imagine an alternative present. They respond to the horrors and despair of climate destruction by

drawing from a rich vein of women's critical utopian thought. By making the near future more tangible and relatable, Crabtree et al. enable us to imagine that another world is not only possible but a beautiful alternative worth fighting for. When the climate crisis and COVID-19 have forced us to confront inequality, unjust history, and humanity's destruction of nature, artists, filmmakers, and writers are creating new ways of seeing and thinking as social-natural crises continue to pile on top of each other. These works can counter the fear and dread of apocalyptic thinking to bring us closer together and inspire us to interrogate the futures we are creating and how we might change course to achieve an altogether different, more just, and resilient outcome.

Notes

- 1 For an example of new scholarship on climate change that bridges visual culture and art history research with an eco-critical perspective, see: T.J. Demos, Emily Eliza Scott, and Subhankar Banerjee, eds. *The Routledge Companion to Contemporary Art, Visual Culture and Climate Change* (New York and London: Routledge, 2021).
- 2 For more on how a wider group of contemporary feminist artist-activists including Nancy Spero, Howardena Pindell, Marlene McCarty, Lava Thomas, Shaun Leonardo, Rayyane Tabet, and Andrea Bowers have used realist drawing, see Julia Bryan-Wilson, "Andrea Bowers: Drawn Toward Feminism," *Andrea Bowers*, ed. Michael Darling and Connie Butler, 60–65 (Delmonico Books, 2021).
- 3 The full caption reads: "'Like a scene from Mars': Skies in parts of California turn orange as wildfires continue." David Ingran and Mohammed Syed, "Like a Scene from Mars," September 9, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/scene-mars-skies-parts-california-turn-orange-wildfires-continue-n1239659>
- 4 Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, "The 'Anthropocene.'" *Global Change Newsletter* (2000): 17–18.
- 5 Joanna Zylińska, *The End of Man: A Feminist Counterapocalypse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018); Richard Grusin, ed. *Anthropocene Feminism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); and Zoe Todd, "Indigenizing the Anthropocene." In *Art in the Anthropocene*, edited by Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin, 241–254 (London: Open Humanities Press, 2016).
- 6 Heather Davis and Zoe Todd, "On the Importance of a Date, or Decolonizing the Anthropocene." *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 16 (4) (2017): 761–780.
- 7 See: Kyle Powys Whyte, "Is it Colonial Déjà Vu? Indigenous Peoples and Climate Injustice." In *Humanities for the Environment: Integrating Knowledges, Forging New Constellations of Practice*, edited by Joni Adamson and Michael Davis, 88–104 (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2017).
- 8 Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, vii (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2015).
- 9 The term was first used by Andreas Malm and then further developed by Jason W. Moore and Donna J. Haraway. See: Malm, *Fossil Capitalism: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (London: Verso, 2016); Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism and the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (London: Verso, 2015); Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016).
- 10 Jason Moore, "The Rise of Cheap Nature." *Sociology Faculty Scholarship* 2 (2016). https://orb.binghamton.edu/sociology_fac/2. Joshua Clover's provocative formulation of the Capitalocene is even more broadly descriptive of the role of economic systems: "ecological despoliation of humans is a consequence not of humans ... as the name Anthropocene suggests, but of Capital ... with its compulsion to produce at a lower cost than competitors for profit." See: Joshua Clover, "The Rise and Fall of Biopolitics: A Response to Bruno Latour." *Critical Inquiry*, March 29, 2020. <https://critinq.wordpress.com/2020/03/29/the-rise-and-fall-of-biopolitics-a-response-to-bruno-latour/>.
- 11 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*. Also see: Deborah Bird Rose, Katherine Gibson, and Ruth Fincher, *Manifesto for Living in the Anthropocene* (Brooklyn: Punctum Books, 2015).
- 12 See Kim Stanley Robinson, *Forty Signs of Rain* (2004; London: HarperCollins, 2005), *Fifty Degrees Below* (2005; London: HarperCollins, 2006), and *Sixty Days and Counting* (London: HarperCollins, 2007).

- 13 Naomi Oreskes and Eric Conway, *The Collapse of Western Civilization: A View from the Future*, 66.
- 14 Naomi Oreskes and Eric Conway, *The Collapse of Western Civilization: A View from the Future*, 71.
- 15 Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway, *The Collapse of Western Civilization: A View from the Future*, 59.
- 16 Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway, *The Collapse of Western Civilization: A View from the Future*, 1–2.
- 17 See Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2010). For more on the 2014 U.S. documentary *Merchants of Doubt*, see: <https://www.sonyclassics.com/merchantsofdoubt/>, <https://www.merchantsofdoubt.org/>
- 18 Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*, 16.
- 19 See the online statement: Naomi Klein, “A Message from the Future with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez,” directed by Kim Boekbinder and Jim Batt, 2019. *The Intercept*, April 17, 2019. <https://theintercept.com/2019/04/17/green-new-deal-short-film-alexandria-ocasio-cortez/>. For the follow up short online film from 2020 that addresses COVID, see: Naomi Klein, “A Message from the Future II, The Years of Repair,” *The Intercept*, October 1, 2020, <https://theintercept.com/2020/10/01/naomi-klein-message-from-future-covid/>.
- 20 See Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, 2 (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2011).
- 21 The German magazine, *Der Spiegel*, aptly called Molly Crabapple’s approach to art unique, saying she had created a new role, that of the political journalist-artist (“*die politische Journalistenkünstlerin*”). See Von Rohr, Mathieu (April 7, 2014) “Politik? Yeah!.” *Der Spiegel* (15): 152–153.
- 22 See the Sunrise Movement’s post on Twitter about Feinstein’s treatment of the activists: <https://twitter.com/sunrisemvmt/status/1099075460649107458?lang=en>
- 23 See Amy Goodman, “Teen Climate Activist to Sen. Dianne Feinstein: We Need the Green New Deal to Prevent the Apocalypse,” *Democracy Now!*, March 1, 2019, https://www.democracynow.org/2019/3/1/teen_climate_activist_to_sen_dianne.
- 24 On Ocasio-Cortez’s experience at Standing Rock, see Gabriella Paiella, “The 28-Year-Old at the Centre of This Year’s Most Exciting Primaries,” *The Cut*, June 25, 2018, <https://www.thecut.com/2018/06/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-interview.html>
- 25 Finis Dunaway, “Our House is on Fire.” In *The Routledge Companion to Contemporary Art, Visual Culture, and Climate Change*, edited by T. J. Demos, Emily Eliza Scott and Subhankar Banerjee, 194–203, 434 (New York and London: Routledge, 2021).
- 26 See Molly Crabapple’s drawings of essential workers: Molly Crabapple, “Underpaid, Ignored, and Essential: A Coronavirus Sketchbook,” *The Nation*, April 3, 2020, <https://www.thenation.com/article/society/coronavirus-crabapple/>
- 27 To view the film online, see Naomi Klein, “A Message from the Future II: The Years of Repair,” *The Intercept*, October 1, 2020, <https://theintercept.com/2020/10/01/naomi-klein-message-from-future-covid/>
- 28 For more on why the future of the climate movement lies in becoming intersectional, see Nancy Fraser, *Climates of Capital*, *New Left Review* 127, January–February 2021.
- 29 See the online statement: Naomi Klein, “A Message from the Future II: The Years of Repair,” *The Intercept*, October 1, 2020, <https://theintercept.com/2020/10/01/naomi-klein-message-from-future-covid/>
- 30 Naomi Klein, “A Message from the Future II: The Years of Repair,” *The Intercept*, October 1, 2020, <https://theintercept.com/2020/10/01/naomi-klein-message-from-future-covid/>

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