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Thinking About the End of World with Kathryn Yusoff and Waubgeshig Rice

***Moon of the Crusted Snow* by Waubgeshig Rice**

ECW Press, 2018. \$19.95 CAD

***A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* by Kathryn Yusoff**

The University of Minnesota Press, 2018. \$10.00 USD

Reviewed by **PRISCILLA JOLLY**

Though the term “apocalypse” includes a notion of unveiling, it has increasingly come to signify the end of the world. Bernard McGinn, in his study of apocalyptic traditions in the Middle Ages, identifies a pattern characterized by “crisis, judgement, and salvation” as the mark of the apocalypse (6). Developments such as the rise of populism around the world, the environmental crisis, and the COVID-19 pandemic have contributed to a collective sense of crisis, which has given the term “apocalypse” contemporary cultural currency. The forays of the human into previously undisturbed ecosystems powered by fossil fuels and capitalistic networks have triggered the current climate crisis, exemplified by the geological era of the Anthropocene. While it certainly seems appropriate to mark an era wherein humans have terraformed the earth to such an extent that changes that take millions of years have been compressed into a shorter geological timeframe, it is also fitting to interrogate whether the collective noun of ‘the human’ implicates everyone equally in these histories of transformation.

It is at this juncture that Kathryn Yusoff’s book *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* intervenes in the discourse surrounding the Anthropocene as she interrogates the racial and colonial histories of geology as a discipline, and how the Anthropocene is predicated upon these very histories. Yusoff argues that while the Anthropocene seems “to offer a dystopic failure that laments the end of the world,” imperialism and “ongoing (settler) colonialisms have been ending worlds” (xiii). Yusoff further questions the ‘we’ that comes up when planetary peril is imagined, pointing out how this imagination of the collective ‘we’ ignores “indigenous genocide and erasure, slavery and carceral labor” (106). Yusoff’s questioning of the collective ‘we’ invoked in these apocalyptic times along with her associated questions on decolonization and “possibility of futures” (104) are thus apt to be read alongside a post-apocalyptic narrative, Waubgeshig Rice’s *Moon of the Crusted Snow*, set in an Anishinaabe community in the Canadian North.

Moon of the Crusted Snow opens with the breakdown of satellite television, cellular service, and finally electricity. Rice’s novel chronicles the community’s attempt to cope with the changes that are brought to the lives of the community members by the disappearance of these services. One of the enduring tensions in the novel is the contrast between ‘development’ and the post-apocalyptic world as the markers of development cease to function. The novel frames development as something that arrived because of settler-colonial interests and not necessarily as something that was driven by the interests of the community. Writing about the cellular towers which stop working, Rice notes that the towers were set up “because the construction

contractors from the South wanted a good signal while they built a massive new hydro dam” (14). The cell tower is further characterized as “a *new luxury* for people who lived on the reserve” (14, emphasis added). Yusoff calls our attention to how settler-colonial dispossession of land is often “recast as development” (12), giving rise to a project of world-making that was “firmly committed to the enlightenment project of liberal individualism” (14). As opposed to the individualism espoused by liberalism, Rice’s novel emphasizes community life, with various members of the Anishinaabe community working together to manage the repercussions of being cut adrift from the world of development.

Rice’s novel and Yusoff’s work further intersect in terms of how they deal with nature and bodies. Focusing on what she dubs as “extractive geo-logics,” (16) Yusoff argues that geology is “a category and praxis of dispossession,” which has determined practices of “colonial extraction in a double sense: first, in terms of settler colonialism and the *thirst* for land and minerals, and second, as a category of the inhuman that transformed persons into things” (67-68, emphasis in the original). Yusoff contends that the human and inhuman are related to settler colonial rights and practices of extraction, further proposing that racialization is tied to a categorization of matter into active and inert, with the extractive matter being activated through “the mastery of white men” (2-3). Contrary to the logics of extraction, Rice’s novel does not present matter as inert, as something awaiting extraction. In the opening pages of *Moon of the Crusted Snow*, we meet Evan hunting a moose in the autumn landscape. After he hunts the moose, Evan places tobacco on the ground, an “offering of gratitude to the Creator and Mother Earth for allowing him to take this life. As he took from the earth, he gave back” (5). Rice’s novel provides a contrast between extractive logics and Indigenous ways of life. One of the characters in the novel, Vinny Jones, is set apart from the rest of the community by virtue of a two-storey house, described as “unusual” (43). The novel further reveals that Jones was able to afford the house because of his work in the mines. While working in a mine seems to provide financial gains, it is worthwhile to note that this work turns material bodies into capital.

In the context of plantation slavery, Yusoff, too, considers alternative modes of ecological relation. In a similar vein of defying extraction, and drawing from Sylvia Wynter, Yusoff explains how slaves developed “different intimacies” with the earth, in the face of the carceral oppression that awaited them in the new lands. For Yusoff, the development of such intimacies marks the struggle against the extractive logics which render certain matter as inhuman (36). Yusoff forcefully argues that “white geology makes legible a set of extractions, from black and brown bodies, and from the ecologies of place”(4).

The extractive logic is represented in the Rice novel through the only white character, Justin Scott, who stumbles into the community. Scott portrays himself as someone who needs asylum from the larger world that is crumbling, only to change his demeanor later in the narrative. As the narrative unfolds, we discover that power outages have led to a collapse of society as we know it. The outages are followed by looting, scarcity of food, and violence. The usual supply routes are disrupted and the community does not get the food restocking that it had hoped for. The Anishinaabe community attempts to survive by rationing food as their food supplies dwindle. Despite the efforts to keep everyone alive, some members of the community die and

their bodies are stored in a makeshift morgue. Personifying extractive logic, Scott ignores the fact that the bodies are friends and relatives of the community and consumes one of the bodies to survive, thus categorizing the body solely as matter requisite for his survival. Scott is described in the text as a monstrous creature emitting a feral odor, with disfigured limbs and tightly stretched skin against his skull (187). Driven to cannibalism by unquenchable thirst and greed, the Anishinaabe spirit, the Wendigo, lurks in the background of this characterization. The colonial and capitalist logics of extraction which incessantly seek new territories, resources, and bodies to appease their *thirst* for land and minerals (Yusoff 68) could also be read as manifestations of the Wendigo.

Both Yusoff and Rice offer important avenues to rethink the racial imaginations that have been associated with the Anthropocene and the genre of post-apocalyptic fiction. *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* is an intervention in geology and the discourse surrounding the Anthropocene which refuses “the structural Whiteness of the Anthropocene in its current formation, potentially toward other, more accountable, decolonized, geosocial futures” (61). *Moon of the Crusted Snow* foregrounds Indigenous futurity in the wake of the collapse of the Canadian nation-state. Yusoff points out how the nation is “predicated on extraction and exploitation” (66). Rice’s novel, while introducing distinct Indigenous imaginaries about post-apocalyptic futures,¹ also ends with an epilogue in which the old infrastructure, including that of the nation-state and its systems, is left behind for a new beginning. Yusoff’s work lays out how the concept of the Anthropocene localizes colonial violence in the past while ignoring how the colonial logics of accumulation function in the present. Rice’s novel bridges the violence of colonial histories and hopes for the future. It calls attention to the fact that for some communities, the apocalypse has already happened. An Anishinaabe elder named Aileen sums it up as follows: “Our world isn’t ending. It already ended” (149). The novel ends on a hopeful note, with the remaining community members poised to “begin this new life nestled deep in the heart of Anishinaabe territory” (213). The novel, through its post-apocalyptic framework, provides a view of what an accountable, decolonial future might look like.

My work as a scholar in environmental humanities engages with contemporary science fiction and how it reproduces nineteenth-century tropes for representations of landscapes. Yusoff and Rice provide cues to organize my work. In terms of methodology, Yusoff raises questions about geology and its process of knowledge-making, thus destabilizing established modes of knowledge production that geology engages in while bringing to the forefront the racial blind spot in geological sciences. Marking an intervention in a genre that has often served as a vehicle for imperialist fantasies, *Moon of the Crusted Snow* moves in the direction of decolonizing the genre of speculative fiction. As I engage with the persistence of certain tropes in speculative fiction, I draw from both Yusoff and Rice as they address the problem of

¹ For more on Indigenous representation in science fiction, see Whyte, Kyle P. “Indigenous Science (Fiction) for the Anthropocene: Ancestral Dystopias and Fantasies of Climate Change Crises.” *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, SAGE Publications Sage UK: London, England, May 2018. Sage UK: London, England. doi:10.1177/2514848618777621. 8/23/2021 2:58:00 PM 8/23/2021 2:58:00 PM

knowledge creation in their respective modes of writing, while offering means to interrogate received tropes of knowledge and possible avenues to reimagine them.

Works Cited

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