

The United States in Collapse

Abigail De Kosnik holds a doctorate in Comparative Literary Studies and Radio/Television/Film from Northwestern University, and is a former fellow of the Paris Program in Critical Theory. She now directs the Berkeley Center for New Media and serves as Associate Professor in the Berkeley Center for New Media and the Department of Theater, Dance, and Performance Studies. She researches popular media, particularly digital media, film and television, and fan studies, and is the author of *Rogue Archives: Digital Cultural Memory and Media Freedom*. She is currently writing a book on artists, politicians, journalists, and “regular” media users who self-identify as media pirates, with the working title *Performing Piracy*.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21985/n2-bkfc-v461>

Copyright © 2020 Abigail De Kosnik. Licensed under [Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International \(CC BY NC ND 4.0\)](#)

Sometime in the late 2000s, I invented a game called Apocalypse vs. Apocalypse. The rules are simple: two or more people sit together and each proposes a different apocalypse—for example, a cataclysmic flood buries entire countries, zombies walk the Earth, a gigantic meteor crashes, robots gain consciousness and try to wipe out their human bosses, an incurable plague spreads, nuclear war breaks out, or hostile aliens arrive—and then speculate about how the apocalypses would play out, in tandem or in conflict with one another. Maybe human survivors fighting zombies would stand a better chance in a massive flooding scenario because zombies wouldn’t know how to seek higher ground? Or maybe governments would use nuclear missiles to fight aliens which would cause a generations-long nuclear winter?

I consider the all-time champion of the game to be new media artist Becca Rose Glowacki, with whom I played A vs. A in 2014. When it was her turn to propose an apocalypse, Becca said simply, “Capitalism.” My face fell. “That’s no game, yo,” I replied somberly. Capitalism was the all-too-real apocalypse, the one spelling

disaster for most of us, so it was too hard to play it out for dystopian fun. Becca won the game with a knockout punch.

But I should have known in 2014 that capitalism was far from the only apocalypse that was already in-progress, already all-too-real. Severe climate change and ecological distress, the Syrian Civil War, and the refugee crisis resulting from that war, were all well underway in 2014. Frequently recurring violent phenomena, such as gun terrorism, racist policing, and sex- and gender-based harassment and abuse, were causing critical harm on a massive scale. In subsequent years, Donald Trump and other blustering demagogues would take positions of national leadership all over the world, creating myriad interlocking conditions for suffering and death.

I write this in the United States of America in July 2020. Around me, apocalypses converge. The COVID-19 pandemic surges. Economic precarity and pain worsen. Street actions decrying police murders of Black Americans are quelled with tear gas and rubber bullets. The President and his administration do not tend to the wounds of the country but deepen them daily, lying about our collective success in combating the virus, rejecting science and data, calling for premature re-openings of businesses and public life, and expanding the current war on immigrants.

I play a new game now, and it is no game. It is called Collapse. I began researching Collapse theories in the mid-2010s, as an alternative to dwelling on the concept of apocalypse. I have written about it elsewhere (De Kosnik 2019), and will offer a summary here. Political scientist James Dator posited in the late 1970s that four futures are possible for any society: Continuation (the society travels along its current course, expanding on existing systems and ways of doing); Collapse (the society fails and its people must construct a new society); Discipline (the society institutes strict resource management measures in order to increase its chances of enduring); and Transformation (the society solves the crises threatening to extinguish it by developing radical new technologies) (Dator 1979). The Continuation future aligns most closely with normative U.S. ideology—a belief in the stock market

is a belief that American capitalism as it currently functions will keep on functioning and improving over time. Most Marxists and socialists believe that a Discipline future, which would (among other things) redistribute wealth through different tax structures and regulate environmentally harmful businesses, could solve many current crises. Many tech industry workers have faith that they can bring about the Transformation future—that their companies will one day produce a utopian sci-fi future in which space travel, intelligent (and obedient) robots, and smart devices will eliminate the majority of the world’s ills.

But to live in the United States during this pandemic is to experience Collapse *now*, not in some distant future. Collapse means radical discontinuity, and the necessity of learning ways of doing, thinking, and being that diverge sharply from previous norms. As of this writing, fourteen million Americans who were employed in the spring have lost their jobs (Kochhar 2020). Over one hundred thirty thousand people in the U.S. have lost their lives (Fox et al. 2020) to COVID-19. One in three Americans could not make their housing payments this month (Warnock and Salviati 2020). In the absence of rent cancellation or other economic relief measures, a massive wave of evictions and foreclosures is imminent. Even for people whose lives, livelihoods, and housing have not (yet) been threatened, life today is completely different than it was six months ago, as work, school, and all manner of congregations take place in virtual space far more often than in than physical space; social distancing and mask-wearing have become normal outdoor hygiene for some and a point of high contestation for others; U.S. passports have become “worthless” as the vast majority of countries refuse to allow Americans to enter (Samarajiva 2020); and mainstays of the national culture such as sports events, television and film production, music concerts and dance clubs, and cruise ship vacations, no longer exist. U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) threatens to install even more draconian measures against our already-besieged migrant population (Montoya-Galvez 2020; Hackman et al. 2020). Black and Latinx Americans, who also suffered disproportionate discrimination and oppression prior to COVID-19, now

suffer disproportionately from COVID-19, both financially and physically (Lopez et al. 2020). In some locations, students and teachers will soon be forced to re-start in-person schooling, putting both groups at high risk of contracting the virus (Sullivan and Green 2020). Where in-person classes will not resume, parents must continue to grapple with the paradox of having to work full-time while caring for their children full-time in their homes. Rampant unemployment and homelessness, and more mass sickness and death, seem unavoidable here, even as other countries with stronger social safety nets and science-based leadership seem to have avoided them. Life in this country is not what it was before, and it would be foolhardy to predict that it will return to what it was in a few months or years, whenever this pandemic passes or a vaccine becomes widely distributed. If this isn't Collapse, it sure feels like it.

It is important to note, however, that Collapse is cause for optimism as well as pessimism. Dator argues that in Collapse, “there are ‘winners’ as well as ‘losers’” (Dator 2009, 9). I do not think it accident or coincidence that during this national crisis, the Black Lives Matter movement has become an uprising. More Americans than ever before are calling for police departments to be defunded so that community and health services can be funded. Cities are tearing down statues, and schools are renaming buildings, bearing the images and names of slaveowners and other racists ((Ortiz and O’Boyle 2020). A city council in North Carolina has unanimously approved reparations to the city’s Black residents in the form of investments in Black homeownership, business, and career programs (Vigdor 2020). A National Football League team has finally agreed to change its racist name (Carpenter 2020). Indigenous peoples have won several significant court cases (Eilperin et al. 2020; Ehrlich and de Vogue 2020). Several of these actions have been theorized and advocated for by participants in the Black radical tradition and indigenous resistance movement for decades. Possibly, the country’s Collapse is finally allowing Black and indigenous worldviews and concepts to rise into

mainstream consciousness and become, not just acceptable, but the bases for the roadmap of a post-Collapse America.

After all, Collapse does not mean apocalypse; people who live in a Collapsed society must suffer a period of uncertain transition, and then eventually form a new society, one that may look very different than the one they previous lived in. There is no reason for a Collapse to last more than a generation; as one Collapse theorist [(Ruppert 2009) posited, a Collapse can take 100 years or it can take 20 years, and faster Collapses are better because people can take the useful remnants of the old infrastructure to build their new systems. The concepts developed by scores of Black and indigenous activists and scholars can help us lay the foundations of a new United States, one that does a better job fulfilling its famous promises of equality and liberty. I argue that Black and indigenous feminist thinkers, as well as other members of historically oppressed minority groups in the U.S., are well-qualified to lead the construction of the next version of this nation, given that their communities have lived through earlier Collapses (including enslavement, settler colonialism, and large-scale structural oppression), considered them deeply over generations, and called for a more humane and ecologically sound society to rise in their wake.

Before this year, I had guessed that the Collapse I would see in my lifetime would be global, and would result from either climate change or the end of hydrocarbon fuels. I didn't predict that the U.S. would enter Collapse because of a pandemic, while many other countries would face the same challenge and proceed along their Continuation futures. I am hopeful that the U.S. entering into Collapse sooner than expected, and more or less alone among Global North nations, will facilitate a period of deep engagement and experimentation with, and courageous implementation of, long-marginalized ideas in government, justice, education, health care, and many other arenas of American life. Collapse means deep fissures are forming here, but through the cracks, new ideas can grow.

But uncertainties over what the post-Collapse U.S. will look like, what it feel like, whom it will work for, and how, are already producing spectacular forms of violence and struggle. Portland, Oregon residents have participated in demonstrations for more than fifty nights over the police killing of George Floyd. Federal officers from a number of agencies have “stormed Portland’s streets as part of Trump’s promised strong response to ongoing protests,” not only critically wounding and gassing protestors but forcibly kidnapping several and detaining them without cause (Shepherd and Berman 2020). The government may expand such unconstitutional repressive measures to other cities and states where prolonged civil rights actions take place. If they do, then Portland 2020 will become a key Collapse moment in retrospect: a moment when it became clear that the war for the country’s future would be a war between antiracism and fascism.

References

- Carpenter, Les. “Washington’s NFL Team to Retire Redskins Name, Following Sponsor Pressure and Calls for Change.” *The Washington Post*. Last modified July 13. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/2020/07/13/redskins-change-name-announcement/>.
- Dator, James. 1979. “The Futures of Culture or Cultures of the Future.” In *Persectives on Cross-Cultural Psychology*, edited by Anthony. J. Marsella, Roland G. Tharmp, and Thomas J. Ciborowski, 369-387. New York: Academic Press.
- Dator, James. 2009. “Alternative Futures at the Manoa School.” *Journal of Futures Studies* 14(2): 1-18.
- De Kosnik, Abigail. 2020. “Piracy Is the Future of Culture.” *Third Text* 34(1): 62-70. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2019.1663687>
- Ehrlich, Jamie and Ariane de Vogue. 2020. “Supreme Court Rules Broad Swath of Oklahoma Is Native American Land for Purposes of Federal Criminal Law.”

Last modified July 9. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/09/politics/tribal-territory-supreme-court-ruling/index.html>.

Eilperin, Juliet, Steven Mufson, and Brady Dennis. 2020. "Major Oil and Gas Pipeline Projects, Backed by Trump, Flounder as Opponents Prevail in Court." *The Washington Post*. Last modified July 6. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2020/07/06/dakota-access-pipeline/>.

Fox, Joe, Brittany Renee Mayes, Kevin Schaul, Leslie Shapiro, and Bonnie Berkowitz. 2020. "At Least 137,000 People Have Died from Coronavirus in the U.S." *The Washington Post*. Last modified July 19. https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/national/coronavirus-us-cases-deaths/?itid=sf_coronavirus.

Hackman, Michelle, Melissa Korn, and Andrew Restuccia. 2020. "Trump Administration Rescinds Rules on Foreign Students Studying Online." *The Wall Street Journal*. Last modified July 14. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/white-house-weighs-scaling-back-rules-on-foreign-students-studying-online-11594746772>.

Kochhar, Rakesh. 2020. "Unemployment Rose Higher in Three Months of COVID-19 Than It Did in Two Years of the Great Recession." Pew Research Center. Last modified June 11. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/06/11/unemployment-rose-higher-in-three-months-of-covid-19-than-it-did-in-two-years-of-the-great-recession/>.

Lopez, Mark Hugo, Lee Rainie, and Abby Budiman. "Financial and Health Impacts of COVID-19 Vary Widely By Race and Ethnicity." Pew Research Center. Last modified May 5. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/05/05/financial-and-health-impacts-of-covid-19-vary-widely-by-race-and-ethnicity/>.

- Montoya-Galvez, Camilo. 2020. "ICE Says Foreign Students Taking Online-Only Classes in the Fall Can't Remain in the U.S." CBS News. Last modified July 6. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/ice-foreign-students-online-only-classes/>.
- Ortiz, Erik and Kaleigh O'Boyle. 2020. "The Next Wave of Statue Removals Is Afoot. See Where They're Being Taken Down Across the U.S." NBC News. Last modified July 9. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/2020-next-wave-statue-removals-afoot-map-n1230506>.
- Ruppert, Michael, quoted in *Collapse*, directed by Chris Smith. 2009. 82 minutes. Premiered at Toronto International Film Festival in September.
- Samarajiva, Indi. 2020. "American Passports Are Worthless Now." Medium. Last modified July 9. <https://medium.com/@indica/the-plague-states-of-america-53b20678a80e>.
- Shepherd, Katie and Mark Berman. 2020. "'It Was Like Being Preyed Upon': Portland Protestors Say Federal Officers in Unmarked Vans Are Detaining Them." *The Washington Post*. Last modified July 17. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/07/17/portland-protests-federal-arrests/>.
- Sullivan, Eileen, and Erica L. Green. 2020. "As Trump Demanded Schools Reopen, His Experts Warned of 'Highest Risk.'" *The New York Times*. Last modified July 11. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/10/us/politics/trump-schools-reopening.html?searchResultPosition=1>.
- Vigdor, Neil. "North Carolina City Approves Reparations for Black Residents." *The New York Times*. Last modified July. 16. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/16/us/reparations-asheville-nc.html>.
- Warnock, Rob and Chris Salviati. 2020. "Missed Housing Payments Continue Piling Up in July." Apartment List. Last modified July 8. <https://www.apartmentlist.com/research/july-housing-payments>.

