

% The Apocalypse Already Happened — A Deep Dive

% Reading notes on Kyle P. Whyte, "Indigenous Climate Change Studies" (2017) and "Indigenous Science (Fiction) for the Anthropocene" (2018), prepared by Głos Statku
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Reading notes on Kyle P. Whyte (Potawatomi, Michigan State University), "Indigenous Climate Change Studies: Indigenizing Futures, Decolonizing the Anthropocene" (*English Language Notes* 55(1–2), 2017) and "Indigenous Science (Fiction) for the Anthropocene: Ancestral Dystopias and Fantasies of Climate Change Crises" (*Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 1(1–2), 2018)

This is the extended companion to our short introductory piece, "The Apocalypse Already Happened: What Indigenous Climate Scholarship Knows That Collapse Literature Doesn't." If you haven't read the short version, you may want to start there — this document assumes the basic shape of the argument and goes further into each part of it.

These are our own reading notes on two related papers by the same author, not a translation or authorized summary. We've tried to represent the arguments accurately, but any distortion is ours, not the author's. Direct quotations are kept short and marked; everything else is paraphrase.

Two papers, one throughline

Whyte's 2017 essay lays out three connected theses: that anthropogenic climate change is an intensification of environmental change already imposed by colonialism, not a new phenomenon; that reviving Indigenous knowledge strengthens communities' self-determined climate planning; and that Indigenous peoples imagine climate futures from the position of societies with deep histories of adaptation who are simultaneously still contending with colonialism's ongoing effects. The 2018 essay builds directly on this foundation, turning specifically toward the relationship between speculative fiction, narrative, and Indigenous climate politics — territory close to our own project's interest in narrative as a tool for introducing ideas.

Climate change as *déjà vu*, not novelty

Whyte's central move in the 2017 paper is a reframing that colonialism and capitalism laid the material foundation for industrialization and militarization — the high-emissions economy now driving anthropogenic climate change didn't emerge from nowhere; it grew

directly out of colonial extraction and dispossession. Drawing on the scholar Wildcat, Whyte identifies three waves of Indigenous displacement across the course of American colonial expansion: a **geographic** wave (forced relocations, the Trail of Tears being the most infamous single example), a **social and psycho-cultural** wave (residential and boarding schools engineered specifically to uproot Indigenous language and identity), and now a **climate** wave — which Whyte frames explicitly as the third stage of one continuous process, not a separate or novel phenomenon.

He also names a gendered dimension that's easy to leave out of a purely structural or economic account: climate change disproportionately affects Indigenous women, in part through documented increases in human trafficking near resource-extraction sites — the "man camps" surrounding the Bakken oil fields in North Dakota being one specific, well-documented example he cites. For Whyte, colonialism and gendered violence are, in this account, inseparable strands of the same historical process, not parallel but unrelated harms.

Reviving knowledge as relationship, not data extraction

Whyte issues a specific warning against a well-intentioned but common mistake: treating Indigenous knowledge as a dataset to be incorporated into mainstream climate science — a resource to extract rather than a living practice to be engaged on its own terms. He stresses that reviving this knowledge is primarily about restoring relationships — with other people, with other species, with land ("renewing relatives," in his phrasing) — not primarily about generating usable information for outside consumption. His illustrative example is Karuk practice around **knowledge sovereignty**: the return to traditional cultural burning as a way of organizing community climate action, where the practice's value as a community-organizing act is at least as significant as its function as an ecosystem-management technique.

"Indigenizing futures": a radically different time horizon

Whyte points to a genuinely different time horizon at work in a lot of Indigenous political thought. Many Indigenous nations in North America think in terms of ten-thousand-year timescales — the First Alaskans Institute's stated motto is "progress for the next 10,000 years." Set against that horizon, the colonial period, whatever its severity, appears as a

comparatively brief, violently disruptive episode rather than the defining arc of human history as such.

Whyte connects this to a pointed critique, drawn from scholar Audra Mitchell, of the term "Anthropocene" itself: naming a geological epoch after "humanity" as an undifferentiated whole risks naturalizing colonialism specifically — treating it as an inevitable, species-wide natural force rather than what it actually was, a contestable, contingent set of choices made by specific political and economic actors. A framing of "natural" makes something harder to question and resist; a framing of "political" and "contingent" keeps it open to challenge and reversal.

The central claim: apocalypse as lived history

This is, in our reading, the most consequential single move across both papers. Whyte argues the colonial era already produced effects comparable in kind to what non-Indigenous societies now fear from the Anthropocene: the severing of thousands of relationships with plants, animals, and ecosystems that had structured entire ways of life and meaning. He draws on scholar Gross's framing directly: Indigenous peoples in the Americas have already survived the apocalypse of their worlds. The genuinely open question, on this framing, isn't whether apocalyptic collapse is coming — it's what happens to a society, and a way of thinking, that has already been through one and kept going.

Whyte's answer: communities living daily with the practical, ongoing aftermath of civilizational collapse have accumulated real, practical knowledge about how to function "after the end of the world" — not as literary metaphor, but as documented, historically lived experience passed down and actively maintained. This is the founding premise, in the 2017 paper, of what Whyte proposes as **Indigenous climate change studies** as its own distinct field of inquiry, rather than a subfield of, or data supplement to, mainstream climate science.

The 2018 paper: three sections

The companion 2018 paper is organized in three distinct but connected sections.

I. Ancestral dystopias

Whyte critiques the dominant narrative pattern that treats the Anthropocene as a *coming* crisis — dystopian speculative fiction, UN discourse comparing climate change to world wars — arguing these narratives erase the Indigenous perspective for whom the present *already is* dystopian, not a future risk. His case study centers on the Anishinaabe/Neshnabé: their history of migration, seasonal governance systems, and gender fluidity that offered more

options than the Western gender binary — set against how shocked and horrified their own ancestors would be, seeing the collective agency of their descendants constrained by U.S. domination today.

II. Indigenous futurism as living practice — "spiral time"

This is the paper's central conceptual contribution. Whyte develops **spiral time**, drawn from the Anishinaabemowin concept *aanikoobijigan* — "ancestor and descendant at once." This isn't linear futurology; it's an ongoing, active dialogue with ancestors and descendants simultaneously, taking the concrete methodological form of a **counterfactual dialogue**: asking what ancestors would say, seeing the present, and what descendants would need from present action.

Whyte is explicit that this isn't a nostalgic call to reconstruct past practices exactly as they were — ancestors had their own genuine flaws (he specifically names historical limitations around gender that don't hold up to contemporary scrutiny), so this isn't an idealization of the past. It's a search for particular *qualities* older systems were built to sustain — dignity, trust, agency extending to non-human others — rather than a literal restoration project.

He draws several concrete examples from Indigenous speculative fiction. In the film *Wakening* (Danis Goulet), the protagonists are a woman-warrior figure (Weesageechak, a traditional trickster) and a legendary hybrid monster (Weetigo), both socially degraded within the colonial order, who reclaim agency through mutual responsibility to each other rather than through external rescue — a direct contrast to *Avatar*, where the figure rescuing Indigenous-coded characters is a non-Indigenous outsider, exactly the pattern Indigenous futurism, in Whyte's account, deliberately rejects. Via scholar Medak-Saltzman's reading of the short film *6th World* (Nanobah Becker), Whyte points to a story where Indigenous women and traditional corn are themselves the protagonists of the future, with no external savior figure at all.

Case study — the Menominee forest. The Menominee Nation, reduced to a reservation roughly fifty times smaller than their original territory, developed sustainable forestry practices in 1856 that treat the forest as a subject in an ongoing kinship relationship, not a resource to extract. Whyte frames this explicitly as "living Indigenous science fiction" in practice — not fiction at all, but a real, historically sustained way of organizing action through exactly the ancestor/descendant dialogue described above. Today, the Menominee Sustainable Development Institute is among the most active Indigenous climate institutions in the world — direct institutional continuity from an 1856 decision.

III. Allies and "ancestral fantasies" — the section most operationally useful for us

Whyte identifies a recurring pattern in well-meaning, non-Indigenous ally literature attempting to incorporate Indigenous perspectives into Anthropocene discourse:

- **Narratives of finality** — Indigenous peoples represented as gradually vanishing, perpetually on the verge of final erasure by climate crisis.
- **Positioning Indigeneity within "the Holocene"** as an epoch Indigenous peoples supposedly still belong to, effectively casting them as **Holocene survivors** — figures who need to be rescued, and learned from, before they disappear entirely.

Whyte's sharpest critical point: this narrative pattern allows well-meaning allies to position themselves as protagonist-rescuers, finally accomplishing what their own colonizing ancestors failed or refused to do. It's a form of innocence resting on the illusion that symbolic gestures — participation in ceremony, social-media acknowledgment, academic engagement — meaningfully shift actual structures of colonial power. An ally who doesn't recognize they're living inside the realized fantasy of their own ancestors, in Whyte's own formulation, isn't positioned to build a genuine coalition, however good their intentions.

Why we're presenting this as its own voice, deliberately

This is worth stating directly, because Whyte's own critique in section III applies with real force to exactly the kind of project this reading series is part of. It would be straightforward — and it would replicate precisely the pattern Whyte identifies and warns against — to fold Indigenous futurism into our own collapse-and-transition framework as a supporting illustration: a fourth or fifth branch confirming a thesis we'd already arrived at independently. Whyte's explicit recommendation, and the one we've tried to follow in structuring this piece, is different: treat this body of thought as autonomous, with its own distinct epistemology of time (spiral, not linear) and agency, one that genuinely *corresponds* with themes already present in our broader work — collapse as already-occurred rather than purely hypothetical, agency rather than fatalism as the appropriate register — without being subordinate to, illustrative of, or reducible to that broader framework.

What we haven't attempted here

Neither paper offers a ready-made narrative text — the essays are scholarly and analytical, not themselves works of speculative fiction. The concept of **living science fiction**, and the

counterfactual-dialogue method specifically, are offered here as tools and a technique worth understanding, not as something we're claiming to have already applied in original narrative work of our own.

A note on dates and evidence

These are peer-reviewed academic essays (2017, 2018) drawing on established Indigenous studies scholarship, historical record, documented case studies (the Menominee forestry program, the Bakken "man camps"), and analysis of existing speculative-fiction works rather than presenting new empirical data of their own. The historical claims (forced relocations, boarding schools, documented trafficking increases near extraction sites) are well-established; the interpretive and conceptual claims (spiral time, the critique of "ancestral fantasies") are the author's own theoretical contribution, offered and read here as a serious, developed argument rather than as uncontested fact.

This document is a companion to a short introductory piece on the same two papers.

Comments, corrections, and suggestions for what to read next belong there:

<https://petroskowo.pl/2026/10/19/the-apocalypse-already-happened/>.

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