

MY ANTI-APOCALYPSE MIXTAPE: What if the answer to the climate crisis is a question?

by Ayana Elizabeth Johnson

WHAT IF THE answer to our planet's climate crisis was a question? That instead of limiting our spectrum of solutions to recycling more, driving electric cars, and voting (which are indeed great things), we let our imaginations run wild — exploring the possibilities of what could happen if we both collectively and individually approached [climate change](#) “as if we love the future?”

It's a question that climate activist and marine biologist, Dr. [Ayana Elizabeth Johnson](#), asks in her new book, *What If We Get It Right?* It's a book that reads more like a curiously helpful map than the usual doom-esque climate texts, and alternatively, invites readers to peruse its pages like a treasure hunt in a quest to discover the depths of the climate crisis and ultimately, where we fit in its future.

“I think so often, the climate question, or implied question, is, ‘How do we avoid the apocalypse?’ And that's not necessarily motivating or inspiring for a lot of people, myself included,” says Johnson. “I don't really spend a lot of my time thinking about the problem. I spend all my time thinking about the solutions. I mean, we have to understand the problem... But then what do we do about it?”

While the book begins with a stark, no-sugar-added “Reality Check” (an actual chapter), it soon moves to the potential art, rom-coms, music, city infrastructure, re-allocated government funding, redesigned newsrooms, and more have to literally save our planet. Johnson, who took on the role of art director for the book, also laid it out in a way that you can open it to any chapter and find yourself engaged: whether it's in a conversation with [Adam McKay](#) (the director of climate film, *Don't Look Up*), filling out a [Venn diagram](#) on how you — specifically — can create climate solutions, or through climate poetry and art. Speaking to Johnson, prior to embarking on her cross-country [book tour-slash-climate-party](#), we discuss the intention behind *What If We Get It Right?*'s uncommon approach, the intersection of environment-culture-politics, and the joyous work of solving the climate crisis.

The book is unique in that you curate different voices to help you answer this urgent question on climate. How did you decide who to include?

These are the people who have helped me see answers to this big title question of, *What If We Get It Right?* These are the people I look to in their different areas of expertise to understand what the way forward could look like. They're actually building the future, whether that's quite literally — for the architects, landscape architects we're talking to, or AI and technology — or if it's policy, or if it's how we grow our food, or how we think about community and living together. These are people who have been my guides and my colleagues, and often very dear friends — they know all my shit. These are very real conversations. Some of these conversations that would normally be had more in private,

that I'm just like, 'Let's open these up to anyone who's wanting to grapple with us with these issues together.'

You also bring together a collection of essays, poems, interviews, and art. What inspired you to pull from a variety of different writing forms versus a traditional how-to text?

The book was [originally] called, *How Humans Survive Humanity* — that's what my book contract says. And I realized that the conversations that I have with all of these people in my life who have all these different areas of expertise are really the thing that I wanted to share ... And I was hoping that would make these things more accessible to people as well. The mosaic of voices, I think, I hope, will keep people's interest longer, as well as exposing us to a breadth of knowledge.

Of course, there's also things I wanted to say. So there's essays by me, and there's quotes by all sorts of different folks that I've collected along the way and found inspiring, and almost none of them were written to be about climate change. I've sort of appropriated them from philosophers, civil rights leaders, activists, scientists, my mom, my dad. It really is just a collection of things that have helped me see things in a helpful new way.

And then, I think poetry and art and music are always really valuable additions to helping us understand the world we live in, and helping us see the way forward, and helping us feel our way through these big transitions that we need to make. I'm sure you, like me, have songs that remind us of different parts of our lives that we listen to on repeat at different moments. In many ways, this book is my mixtape. It's like my anti-apocalypse mixtape. And then, of course, the inside of the back cover is [my literal anti-apocalypse mixtape](#), a list of 50 or so songs that remind me of climate, that capture 'anthems for victory, love songs to Earth, tunes for tenacity, and sexy implementation vibes.'

Do you recommend people listen to the playlist from top to bottom?

Oh, yeah. I spent probably 80 hours making this playlist, choosing the songs and making sure it was all in exactly the right order. There's a method to it. Don't listen on shuffle. Some of them are songs from my childhood. My dad's Jamaican, so Jimmy Cliff and Bob Marley are on there, and we listened to jazz all the time growing up. So there's some Nina Simone and others in there. There's some songs that came out last year on there too — Rihanna, Maggie Rogers, Lake Street Dive, Marvin Gaye, Beyonce, Aretha Franklin, Sam Cooke — It's really all over the map.

I hope that people will think about multiple things like, 'Why don't we have climate music?' Obviously, people are writing songs about climate, but they're not really percolating up through culture. They're not songs that we do karaoke to. And that's so different from, say, the Civil Rights Movement, which had so many incredible anthems people were singing together in the streets. It was part of what kept us going and what kept us connected and kept our eyes on the prize. And for this massive challenge that we're facing as a society — arts and culture are not front and center in the way that it should be.

I hope people will be inspired to make their own anti-apocalypse playlist. Like, what songs keep you going or inspire you or make you want to fight for the future?

Along with the music, the book also has incredible art by Afrofuturist Olalekan Jeyifous.

I think bringing art and music into this book just came naturally to me and I didn't realize until I saw it published. I was like, 'Oh, this is not a normal climate book.' There's salvage-punk, retro-futurist art in there that was commissioned for this. We just don't have very many visions of what the future looks like if we get it right. We do not have something to run towards in that way. We don't have concrete visions that show us that it's worth the effort to make all these changes that are needed.

The title of the book is a question. It's not an answer. The book doesn't have the definitive answer to what getting it right looks like. And I think the framing — *the what if?* — the leaning into possibility, not in a naive, optimistic way, but in a real, grounded-in-facts way, is something it seems people have been missing and wanting.

Even just announcing the book and sharing the title and being in conversation with people before the book was even published, people are like: 'What if we got it right? Why don't I think about that more? Why don't we have movies that show us that? Why don't we have music about that? Why can't I think of a piece of art about what's going on?'

I've just been completely enamored with what if questions right now as part of the work that we need to do together, the conversations that we need to be having. And as you've seen, each section of the book opens with a set of what if questions — my two favorite besides the title are: What if climate adaptation is beautiful and what if we act as if we love the future?

Define beautiful.

So, often people think about climate solutions as technical and gray infrastructure and sort of eyesores — as opposed to something that could be literally beautiful, elegant, integrated into our lives and landscapes, well designed, right, durable.

We all have our favorite architects and buildings and designers. Could we imagine a world where people, artists, and designers, whose work we love, [create] their vision of the world?

[Seventy-five percent of the infrastructure that will be in place in 2050 has yet to be built.](#) We are literally building the future right now. We are overhauling things, because it's time, right? And so if we're rebuilding, if 75 percent of what exists in 25 years is going to be new, why don't we do it right? Why don't we make it beautiful? We get to decide these things as humans: what we build and how we build. And to me, that's this sense of possibility that opens up is really exciting.

Why do you think that sense of possibility or posing this question that way is so powerful?

I think so often, the climate question, or implied question, is 'How do we avoid the apocalypse?' And that's not necessarily motivating or inspiring for a lot of people, myself included. I don't really spend a lot of my time thinking about the problem. I spend all my time thinking about the solutions.

I mean, we have to understand the problem, and we have to know what the stakes are and what's at risk. But then what do we do about it? We can't just stop there. So, in the book,

opening every section, are these lists of 10 problems and 10 possibilities that are paired so that every time we think about the problems, this layout is telling us we should look right next to them for the possibilities.

Every inch of the book is intentional, from the cover to the layout.

I wanted [the book cover] to mostly leave room for the imagination. I didn't want to paint you the answer to this question. I wanted you to feel like [you had] a little bit of a blank slate.

The cover is designed so that you have to hold "[Visions of Climate Futures](#)" to open the book. [Johnson holds up the book and points to the quoted text at the bottom right corner.] Typically the author's name would be on the bottom. The hierarchy would be: title, subtitle, author's name. But I was like, put me up away in the corner, and then it really is about the title, and the subtitle is the thing that leads you to the "Visions of Climate Futures."

This is just a fun surprise, like you would not expect from a very simple cover to open it and have this super fun salvage punk, solar punk, salvage futurist stuff going on in there. And then the word list is a treasure hunt, all these words appear in the book in this order. ... [There's] marginal markings to make sure that people you know don't miss the sweet or super insightful or cautionary notes throughout the book. And I really used footnotes to interject a little sass and side commentary in there. ... It represents how I approach climate work. The only reason I should make a book is if it's a book no one else could make.

To shift to politics and climate, the two candidates running for the presidency offer two very different visions for the climate. What policies and legislation are at stake in this election?

There's a great graph actually showing the projected difference in carbon emissions of electing Kamala Harris versus electing Donald Trump. It's wildly diverging futures in terms of the greenhouse gasses in our atmosphere. Because on the one hand, you have Kamala Harris, who was the deciding vote to pass the [Inflation Reduction Act](#), which is setting us on a path to decarbonizing our electricity in the next 10 years and investing billions of dollars in climate justice and transportation and electric vehicles and offshore wind energy and protecting and restoring ecosystems that are also absorbing all this carbon and creating the American climate core that's putting tens of thousands of young people to work doing stuff like figuring out how to manage forest fires and put up solar panels and restore wetlands.

I mean, these are like major things that the Biden-Harris administration has done, and we can assume that at the very least, she will be not repealing her own laws that she helped pass, and all signs point to her being very serious about building on that legacy.

On the other hand, you have Trump, who literally tried to [sell his campaign to the fossil fuel industry](#). He said, If you give me a billion dollars, I will make rules that favor your profits when I am elected. And so that is the stark contrast that we are facing. And last time he was president, he destroyed over [100 environmental regulations](#) — clean air, clean water, species protections — in all these different federal agencies. In many ways, the last four years have been trying to put a lot of that back together so we can have some basic environmental standards still in place in this country. Those are the stakes. We could be on

a path to successfully addressing the climate crisis, or we could be making it worse in ways that are incredibly dangerous and even deadly for many millions of people, in fact, for the entire planet.

I really enjoyed reading the chapter, “The Planet is the Headline,” and the discussion with Kendra Pierre-Louis [a science journalist focused on climate]. It got me thinking about the way newsrooms can better address stories involving the climate crisis.

There’s this impulse in journalism to be neutral, which is understandable — that’s being objective, yes, fact based, absolutely, but I think that’s been conflated so that we can’t talk about what’s next, or what this implies, right? Or how people could engage here. Because, you know, if we write pieces about how big decisions are being made about which source of electricity is going to be built out in your community, for example — journalists never say actually [that] this is up for discussion in your city council meetings, anyone can go and weigh in or ask questions. It is our right as citizens to have access to these processes, our opinions do matter, and politicians do listen because they want to be reelected by you. And I think [solutions journalism] helps people connect those dots. I think this is something I wish — just like Kendra points out in the book — that was more obvious to people. Because right now, if you are a concerned citizen, it’s often very hard to figure out where your voice matters, what your opportunities are to be part of shaping these policies.

Yes, and it also had me thinking, which the book touches on, “How do you integrate solutions journalism in daily news?”

First of all, the book has been successful because you are asking yourself these questions. And I think that’s the whole point is like, ‘How would I apply this in my life? What would that look like?’ Because it’s often not immediately obvious. I mean, I think what Kendra is suggesting is that there needs to be some training for journalists across all topics, for some climate literacy to understand how the issues that they cover interact with climate. [What] if all of the reporters that you worked with understood the 101 — or 201 — of climate, regardless of which beat they’re on, and had that on their checklist of ‘How does this relate to climate?’ In the same way that a lot of times reporters think about, for example, ‘How does this intersect with race and class?’ It is another filter or angle that we could weave into every story, even if it’s just a sentence or two to help people connect those dots a little better.

There’s some really interesting journalism happening around [how climate change is affecting music tours](#) in the summer, where there are storms and heat waves and hail storms. [What does that mean for music?](#) How are our [artists that are touring](#) the country dealing with these things? How are venues dealing with these things? How is this a [safety issue](#) for people attending these events? How does this ripple through the insurance industry, private insurance, etc.

You often discuss how racism is intertwined with climate change. Which leads me to ask: What can we learn from the civil rights movements of the Fifties and Sixties and the BLM protests of 2020 that we can apply to the climate fight today?

We have to do a lot of this work on solutions in person, like both of those examples you

gave, that was about people coming together in real life — not just for marches — but for meetings, for discussions, for talking about what world do we want to create.

[Another] lesson I learned, that I also mention in the book, from Black Lives Matter organizers is this term: leaderful. What we need is a leaderful movement. That movements are fragile when they're helmed by a single charismatic individual. If you lose that person, you lose the momentum, you lose the cohesion. And so we need many leaders.

The third part is the 'I may not get there with you' part. This is the work of our lifetimes, and it's work that will continue after we're gone. And even though we can't determine the outcome, it will be worth it to try to make your own contribution to the changes that need to happen and that that will feel good even along the way.

I mean, the polling shows that the [biggest motivator is love for future generations](#). That makes people want to roll up their sleeves and figure out how they can contribute. And that, I think, is probably the sweetest thing that I've learned in researching this book. People just really care about making a safe world for the children of today and tomorrow. It's not selfishness that's motivating people who are doing this work. It's love.