

The podcast *How to Survive the End of the World* offers a unique view of apocalypse

Autumn Brown and adrienne maree brown explore the end of the world as we know it.

by [Kathryn Reklis](#) in the [July 15, 2020](#) issue



APOCALYPTIC LEARNING: Sisters adrienne maree brown (left) and Autumn Brown (right), creators and hosts of the podcast *How to Survive the End of the World*. (Photo by Tommy Franklin)

Amid our current collision of state-sanctioned violence, white supremacist policies, and human vulnerability in the face of a pandemic, I can't stop listening to the podcast *How to Survive the End of the World*. Created and hosted by sisters Autumn Brown and adrienne maree brown, the weekly podcast says it's about "learning from the apocalypse with grace, rigor and curiosity." It is a series of imagination-expanding conversations about what it means to flourish and survive inside and beyond systems of death and destruction, even as those systems themselves may be collapsing.

While the Brown sisters have been creating the podcast since 2017, their most recent episodes are part of a special miniseries created by Autumn in response to

the intersection of the coronavirus pandemic and the Movement for Black Lives. They imagine the apocalypse not as a soon-to-come event of mass destruction but as a present reality. Their use of the word *apocalypse* has to be understood in at least three different ways.

One is the concentrated decimation of the ecosystem that sustains organic life. This has been ongoing for at least 500 years, and along with that decimation has been the destruction of the cosmologies and ways of life that worked in conjunction with the ecosystem's thriving. In this sense, black, indigenous, and people of color have been surviving the end of the world for just as long.

The second way that we have to understand *apocalypse* is as the end of the oppressive systems that have served as ordinary reality for so long. These are the convulsions in which we currently find ourselves.

The third understanding of *apocalypse* is as revelation. As old ways of understanding and living collapse, the Brown sisters imagine an opening for new forms of life. *How to Survive the End of the World* takes as its premise that the world has already ended many times for many people, and it celebrates the arts of survival in practices of community, justice, and healing upheld by people inside a world bent toward their destruction.

In two recent episodes—"Tactical Hope" (May 1) and "The OODA Loop" (May 7)—Autumn talks to Pinar and So, the cofounders of Queer Nature, a self-described "queer-run nature education and ancestral skills program" that provides survival training for LGBTQ2+ people of color. Queer Nature participates in a growing survival culture that anticipates the collapse of the industrial world and the need for humans to survive under radically new circumstances—but it expands our imagination as to who survives. In mainstream culture, survival is often envisioned as conquest over hostile nature and other humans who compete for scarce resources. The vision of who can and will survive is imagined as a mostly white, mostly male warrior who rediscovers a primal strength that has been largely domesticated out of him by postindustrial bureaucracy. (Think about the wildly popular zombie apocalypse show *The Walking Dead* or the survival reality TV show *Naked and Afraid* .)

Queer Nature provides practical survival skills (like camouflage and evasion) to queer people, indigenous people, people of color, and people with disabilities,

shifting the sense of which bodies are imagined as able to survive the end of the world. But the group's vision is far deeper than inclusion in survivalist culture. It imagines a new cosmology in which bodies that have been understood as unnatural inhabit new relationships with nature, in which love for an interconnected ecology motivates action through wonder and enchantment, in which moments of upheaval provoke us to practice collective thinking and action instead of lone survival strategies focused on extracting resources for personal gain.

The episode "Braiding Seeds" (April 23) centers on a conversation with Leah Penniman, cofounder of Soul Fire Farm, a black-led farming collective in upstate New York that is committed to ending racism and injustice in the food system and cultivating food sovereignty for communities of color. Penniman, author of the book *Farming While Black*, discusses her own relationship with agricultural practice and the work of sustaining hope in the midst of ecological collapse and continued racism. She shares practical tips for how to extract lead from city soil before starting an urban garden, and she discusses her own return to land-based work after her ancestors fled sharecropping in the Deep South. The farm teaches black communities to grow their own food, and it seeks to retrieve West African cosmology and social practice to orient participants toward different means of living with the land.

These theological undertones of alternative cosmologies, spiritual practices, and communal experiments are not accidental. Autumn Brown studied theology at both Oxford and the General Theological Seminary, and while she doesn't speak in terms of Christian doctrine, she and her guests see their work as inhabiting new relationships between the human, nonhuman, and more-than-human worlds.

There is something unsettling about these theological and cosmological invitations—especially if you are a white liberal person trained to think in terms of policy reform and political action, or a liberal Christian accustomed to nudging the needle of justice without throwing out the compass. But there is something exhilarating about them, too. They are reminders that communities have been tending and cultivating collective wisdom for a long time in order to imagine a way beyond ecological destruction and white supremacy. They are actively choosing to live in ways that are radically otherwise to the world as it now exists.

Listening to the Brown sisters and their guests is an invitation to learn from the end of the world as we know it, and even to long for it.

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