

A dense forest scene with sunlight filtering through the trees. The image shows a variety of trees, including tall, thin trunks and large, feathery ferns in the foreground. The light is warm and golden, creating a misty or ethereal atmosphere. The text is overlaid on this background.

12. Katrina and Anthropocene Thinking

Jesmyn Ward, *Salvage the Bones*
Day 4

ENGL133 Imagining Nature

Course Stuff

-Tiny Ecologies #4: Due date extension to Sunday 4/20 at 5 pm

How Katrina Enters the Narrative

“Katrina has made landfall in Florida ... miles from Miami.”

It is the local news. The weatherwoman is speaking with the anchor, and she is pointing at the interactive screen before her, but the television is so old and resolution so bad that the map looks like concrete, and the storm, an oil stain.

“Early reports say that there are some dead. Does anyone ... idea of where ... projection of storm?” Mike’s voice is even, smooth, when we catch it through the static.

“... unclear. The storm is currently a category one ... could weaken ... could change.” The woman’s hair is light; she may be blonde. ...

“So what does this mean?”

“This means that our viewers may ... preparations to remain in their homes for the hurricane, and instead may want to begin ... possible evacuation.” Rachel appears to be smiling. (135)

-the effect of this scene? the ellipses?

-media coverage and the consumption of disasters

-race and the hurricane: white news personalities vs the reception in Bois Sauvage?

-to what extent is this scene about slow violence as well as the quick, spectacular violence of Katrina?

-evacuation and the illusion of choice

How is *Salvage the Bones* an Anthropocene novel? And Whose Anthropocene?

- the Anthropocene is imagined by geologists as the period when *anthopos* (the human) changes the environment

Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*

- Yusoff is a geographer who focuses on “inhuman geographies”
- she uses black feminist methods to understand environmental change, past geologic practices, and contemporary politics
- in *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* she argues that the Anthropos (man) of the Anthropocene is assumed to be white and whiteness becomes the color of universality
- why does this matter?
- it matters because we often think of geology (the defining of geological eras such as the Holocene and the Anthropocene) as “neutral” scientific facts
- instead she shows how they are based on racialized assumptions as well as an extractive economy that relies on the work (free or enslaved) of black, brown, and indigenous peoples

“If the Anthropocene proclaims a sudden concern with the exposures of environmental harm to white liberal communities, it does so in the wake of histories in which these harms have been knowingly exported to black and brown communities under the rubric of civilization, progress, modernization, and capitalism. The Anthropocene might seem to offer a dystopic future that laments the end of the world, but imperialism and ongoing (settler) colonialisms have been ending worlds for as long as they have been in existence.”

- Yusoff, from the “Preface” to *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*

- the goal for Yusoff is to break out of the cycle that assumes universal whiteness of the Anthropocene so that the future can be fairer to black, brown, and indigenous peoples, peoples of the Global South as well as the Global North
- the goal is to think through a multiplicity of Anthropocenes that take Blackness/ Brownness/ Indigeneity as their basis rather than just assuming that the Anthropocene subject is white

***Salvage the Bones* as an Anthropocene Novel**

What is Jesmyn Ward's environmental vision? How does it engage the idea of a Black Anthropocene?

- Ward shows us a Black subject dealing with the dangers of anthropogenic climate change
- there is the spectacular danger of the hurricane
- but juxtaposed with it, there are the everyday dangers of being a Black girl in the American South: the poverty, the potential unwanted pregnancy, and the racism
- Ward's weather is twofold: there is the literal weather event and there is the "weathering" of Esch's body caused by neglect, hunger, and lack of access to basic shelter and health services
- Ward shows us the effects of climate and climate change on Esch's body and her family

The Eleventh Day: Katrina

Animals and the Ontological Mixer of the Storm

The fight about whether the dogs can stay inside the house during the storm.
Randall before the storm: “This is a house, Skeetah. For humans. Not for dogs”
(211)

Skeet’s response: “Everything need a chance.” (214)

In the middle of the storm after the tree falls in through their roof: “Then [Skeetah] and China step as one, a new animal, toward the light opening of the hallway where the wind whistles in a thin sheet under Daddy’s door.” (224)

“There is a lake growing in the yard. It moves under the broken trees like a creeping animal, a wide-nosed snake. Its head disappears under the house where we stand, its tail wider and wider, like it has eaten something greater than itself, and that great tail stretches out behind it in the woods, toward the Pit. China barks. The wind ripples the water and it is coming for us.” (226-7)

The Eleventh Day: Katrina Voices of/in the Storm

-the chapter open with Esch imagining what animals do in the storm:

“When Mama first explained to me what a hurricane was, I thought that all the animals ran away. ... But now I think that other animals, like the squirrels and the rabbits, don’t do that at all. Maybe the small don’t run. Maybe the small pause on their branches, the pine-lined earth, nose up, catch the coming storm air that would smell like salt to them, like salt and clean burning fire, and they prepare like us.” (215)

-then the recorded government message announcing the mandatory evacuation: “A man’s voice speaks; he sounds like a computer, like he has an iron throat. ... You have been warned. And these could be the consequences of your actions. There is a list. .. You can die.” (217)

The Eleventh Day: Katrina Voices of/in the Storm

“The storm screams, I have been waiting for you. It is terrible. It is the flailing wind that lashes like an extension cord used as a beating belt. It is the rain, which stings like stones, which drives into our eyes and beds them shut. It is the water, swirling and gathering and spreading on all sides, brown with an undercurrent of red to it, the clay of the Pit like a cut that won’t stop leaking. It is the remains of the yard, the refrigerators and lawn mowers and the RV and mattresses, gloating like a fleet. It is trees and branches breaking, popping like Black Cat firecrackers in an endless crackle of explosions, over and over and again and again. It is us huddling together on the roof, me with the wire of the bucket handle looped over my shoulder, shaking against the plastic. It is everywhere.” (230-231)

- what are the effects of these descriptive strategies?
- personification?
- how do similes work here?

The Eleventh Day: Katrina

How do the storm plotline and the Batiste family plotlines intersect in this chapter?

- Ward often intercuts and juxtaposes different plotlines to make a point
- the height of the storm as the Batistes are forced to abandon their attic and try to get to the higher ground of Mother Lizbeth and Papa Joseph's house
- the narration of Mama's death and Junior's birth (220-221)
- Esch's mythological reading: Jason abandons Medea and remarries (225)
- Skeetah telling Daddy that Esch is pregnant (234)
- Skeetah must choose between saving Esch and saving China (235)
- What is the effect of intercutting these plotlines?
 - how does climax and resolution work here?

Fate, Tragedy, and Hurricanes

- The storm serves as an amplifier about human ideas about choice and free will
- The inexorable logic of Greek tragedy in the Medea analogy //s the inexorability of the coming hurricane

Did Daddy have to use the truck to pull down the chicken coop at night?

Before we judge a drunk for his own injuries, Ward asks us to remember that he's trying to board up his house to save his family

Did Skeet have to fight China?

he's trying to send Randall to basketball camp because there's no money otherwise

Do we judge Esch for getting pregnant?

Remember that she is a motherless girl looking for love in the male-dominated world of The Pit

- Ward has dignified a community that some might judge harshly or dismiss and instead elevate them to the status of Greek myth

Mothers in *Salvage the Bones*

-What is the relation between motherhood and nature? What models of maternity does the novel offer? How are they interrelated?

-the discussion between Skeet and Manny early in the novel about whether motherhood makes China weak or strong (95-96)

-the ghost of Esch's mother who died in childbirth-the absent mother

-China as mother (both nurturing and murderous)

-Medea as mother (China as Medea)

-Katrina as a mother:

Katrina is "the mother that swept into the Gulf and slaughtered. Her chariot was a storm so great and black the Greeks would say it was harnessed to dragons. She was the murderous mother who cut us to the bone but left us alive, left us naked and bewildered as wrinkled newborn babies, as blind puppies, as sun-starved newly hatched baby snakes. She left us a dark Gulf and salt-burned land. She left us to learn to crawl. She left us to salvage. Katrina is the mother we will remember until the next mother with large, merciless hands, committed to blood, comes. (255)

-Esch as mother in the novel's last lines, the fantasy of China's return after the hurricane:

"[China] will look down on the circle of light we have made in the Pit, and she will know that I have kept watch, that I have fought. China will bark and call me sister. In the star-suffocated sky, there is a great waiting silence.

She will know that I am a mother." (258)

-how do the last lines refer back to the novel's opening?

What Survives?

- community survives: Big Henry and Marchese help the Batistes

- Esch's baby survives:

 - The naming of the child either after her mother Rose Temple Batiste or after her brother Skeetah: Jason Aldon Batiste.

 - the naming says that family survives despite the storm, despite the poverty, despite the betrayals.

- the family that will raise the baby survives:

“Who the daddy?” Big Henry asks. There is no blazing fire to his eyes, no cold burning ice like Manny’s. Only warmth, like the sun on the best fall days when the few leaves that will turn are starting and the air is clear and cloudless.

“It don’t have a daddy,” I say. ...

“You wrong,” Big Henry says. ... “This baby got a daddy, Esch. ... This baby got plenty daddies.” (254-55)

- effect of the environmental epic simile used to describe Big Henry?

- the replacement of the naturalized romantic nuclear family with an assembled family

***Salvage the Bones* as an American Environmental Epic**

- how do storms shape our national consciousness? How do they lay bare issues in our society? What is Katrina to Ward and her characters?
- it is a nonhuman force that turns the human world inside out and lays bare its hidden structures
 - the poverty and lack of resources
 - Esch's pregnancy
 - but also the community that becomes apparent in the wake of the storm
- What is particularly American about it?
 - Ward turns a national disaster into a national epic
- Ward imagines a Black Anthropocene subject in Esch whose story shows us what is usually hidden when we speak of anthropogenic climate change and its dangers (like Kathryn Yusoff)
- what does Esch's perspective on this event add to the media portrayals of Hurricane Katrina that we discussed last week?

The Voices of the Storms

What can we take away from the 3 storms that we've encountered over the last several weeks?

-Shakespeare's *The Tempest*: a 16th c. fictional storm created by art but based on a real hurricane that wrecked a ship on the coast of Bermuda

- storms are an agent of transformation (personal and political)

- storms reveal the inner workings of power (Prospero's power; Caliban's subjugation)

Daniel Defoe's three accounts of the 1703 storm: the reporting is an early 18th c. Enlightenment model of documenting and quantifying storm damage

- but in the sermon and the poem, the storm is placed in its providential context: what was the divine message? For Defoe, it was that human provoked the storm through religious and political partisanship

-Ward's *Salvage the Bones*: shows us both the spectacular violence of the storm but also the slow violence of intergenerational poverty, structural racism, and environmental degradation

- it shows us the beauty of the bayou and its potential dangers

- like *The Tempest*, *Salvage the Bones* reveals how power works in America

-these 3 accounts are all models of anthropogenic weather events, just with different messages

