

# 11. Katrina and Anthropocene Thinking

Jesmyn Ward, *Salvage the Bones*  
and the Anthropocene Storm

ENGL133 Imagining Nature



## Reading in the Anthropocene

- definition of Anthro/cene
- first proposed as a geological epoch by atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen and limnologist Eugene Stoermer in 2000
- when did the human start influencing climate? Several “golden spike” candidates:
  - ca 1452/ 1610 transatlantic colonialism (the Colombian Exchange and a dip in carbon monoxide)
  - mid 19th c. Industrial Revolution (begins largest release of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere)
  - Nuclear fallout of plutonium ca. 1950 (a distinct geological signature in sediments)
- most environmental and literary critics use the Industrial Revolution as the ‘golden spike’

# Why Anthropocene Reading?

In the Anthropocene, “the wall between human and natural history has been breached. We may not experience ourselves as a geological agent, but we appear to have become one at the level of the species. And without that knowledge that defies historical understanding there is no making sense of the current crisis that affects us all. ... [T]here are no lifeboats here for the rich and the privileged (witness the drought in Australia or recent fires in the wealthy neighborhoods of California).”

-Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry* 35.2 (Winter 2009): 197-222; 221.

[T]he Anthropocene presents a challenge not only to the arts and humanities, but also to our commonsense understanding and beyond that to contemporary culture in general. ... [T]his is perhaps the most important question ever to confront culture in the broadest sense—for let us make no mistake: the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination.

-Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*

- reading in the Anthropocene makes us think about how the human and the nonhuman worlds are necessarily intertwined
- what is the role of realist fiction in the Anthropocene?
- it encourages us to visualize how human stories are shaped by beyond-the-human forces that are hard to see (biophysical processes such as geologic shifts and climate change)
- while we have seen this entanglement in earlier works we’ve read, the realist novel (like Ward’s) makes it conspicuous in its figurative language

## How is the coming storm a character in the novel?

“If one of Daddy’s drinking buddies had asked what he’s doing tonight, he would’ve told them he’s fixing up for the hurricane. It’s summer, and when it’s summer, there’s always a hurricane coming or leaving here. Each pushes its way through the flat Gulf to the twenty-six-mile manmade Mississippi beach, where they knock against the old summer mansions with their slave galleys turned guesthouses before running over the bayou, through the pines, to lose wind, drip rain, and die in the north. Most don’t even hit us head-on anymore; most turn right to Florida or take a left for Texas, brush past and glance off us like a shirtsleeve. We ain’t had one come straight for us in years, time enough to forget how many jugs of water we need to fill, how many cans of sardines and potted meat we should stock, how many tubs of water we need. But on the radio that Daddy keeps playing in his parked truck, I heard them talking about it earlier today. How the forecasters said the tenth tropical depression had just dissipated in the Gulf but another one seems to be forming around Puerto Rico.” (4)

- how does it serve to characterize others? (Manny; Skeetah)
- how linked to family and memory? (Mama’s bbq during the last hurricane6)

# Figuring Esch's Pregnancy

- “Maybe it’s China that made me get it.” (30)

“My belly is solid as a squash, because there is this baby inside me, small as Manny’s eyelash in mid-sex on my cheek.” (57)

“There it is. It is not a watermelon curve. It is not that large. It is not a cantaloupe curve; it is not that insistent. The closest I can get to it is a honeydew curve; it is long and slight. I push with my hands, and it will not sink to dense pearls like fat. It pushes back, water flush and warm.” (87-88)

“In the bathroom, I bend over standing and knead my stomach, knead the melon to pulp, but it just keeps springing back: ripe. Intent on bearing seed.” (102)

- How does figurative language work?

- metaphor (identity; something is the thing) vs. simile (something is similar to the thing)

- how do similes work here?

- how is this a “kinship of the world” model (Kimmerer/ Vine Deloria)?

## Esch's Pregnancy: What Are Her Options?

“I could find something big enough and hard enough to jump on: Daddy’s dump truck hood, Daddy’s tractor, one of the old washing machines out in the yard. We have bleach in the laundry room. Only thing I wouldn’t be able to find is the birth control pills; I’ve never had a prescription, wouldn’t have money to get them if I did, don’t have any girlfriends to ask for some, and have never been to the Health Department. Who would bring me? Daddy, who sometimes I think forgets I am a girl? Big Henry, one of the few of our friends who has a car? Manny? Teeth-in-the-dark Manny? *If I took care of it, he would never know, I think, never know, and then maybe it would give him time. Time to what? I push. Be different. Love me.*

These are my options, and they narrow to none. (102-3)

-What does choice mean here?

-Parallels between Medea and Esch? What is the relationship between fate and choice?



# Esch's Reading *Mythology*: Medea and Jason

Medea's mythological backstory:

- the gods make Medea fall in love with Jason so that she will help him on his quest to gain the Golden Fleece
- Medea helps Jason who achieves his quest; then she betrays her family in order to help him escape
- she flees with him, marries him, and bears his children though Jason ultimately callously abandons her and the children for another woman
- her revenge includes killing their children

“When Medea falls in love with Jason, it grabs me by my throat. I can see her. Medea sneaks Jason things to help him: ointments to make him invincible, secrets in rocks. She has magic, could bend the natural to the unnatural. Bet even with all her power, Jason bends her like a young pine in a hard wind; he makes her double in two. I know her.” (38)

- epic similes-an extended comparison of two dissimilar things
- cf. Medea and Jason in Hamilton's *Mythology* as pine trees
- like the classical story, Esch's story asks questions about the relation between fate and choice, motherhood and love



John William Waterhouse, “Jason and Medea” (1907)

# Animals are People Too (and Vice Versa)

“Skeetah kneels, runs his hand down China’s chest. She looks up and her whole body shimmies like a woman dancing down at the Oaks, a blues club set on six acres of woods and a baseball diamond in the middle of Bois.” (92)

“Mama had been on the dance floor. .. She had shook like China, threw her head back so water glistened down her throat, and her body ran in curves when normally she was all solid. She was beautiful.” (93)

“Manny is like China when she is beset by mites in her ear. She runs in circles, chasing her tail, lashing her head against bushes, hoping to shake them out until Skeetah clasps her between his knees, holds her head abasits bushes, hoping to shake them o ut until Skeetah clasps her between his knees, holds her head and treats them. Manny runs like that up and down the court, weaving through Big Henry and Marquise for layups.” (119)

“[Randall] puts his hand on Manny, who is on his toes before Big Henry, and with a squeeze to Manny’s shoulder, he is Skeetah to China. Manny calms.” (120)

- how do similes work here? contrast
- ontological permeability
- how is this a model of transcorporeality?
- what is the effect in the novel?
- How does novel encourage us to see the relationship between humans and animals? (cf bestiaries, *Parliament of Fowls*)



# Analyzing Literary Language

1. Read carefully and take notes. What is the author's purpose in this scene? Come up with a hypothesis for how the language works to support the author's purpose or produce the emotional or logical effect.

2. Find textual evidence (brief quotations from the text that back up your argument) and then analyze them. Do not quote and run.

3. Evidence can take the form of figurative language, diction (unusual vocabulary or word choice), or style. Look for what's unusual or vivid to discuss in Ward's language, such as:

- Metaphor / similes (or other analogies)
- Hyperbole (exaggeration for effect)
- Personification / prosopopoeia
- Anthropomorphism
- Repetition
- Unusual word choice

4. Then ask: What is the effect of each instance of this language? How does a comparison or other rhetorical figure work? What is its effect on us?

# **In-class Writing Assignment: Ward's Literary Language**

Work with a partner but write down your answers separately with your name on it so you can turn it in at the end of class (unless you are both in the same section).

Look at the scene at the very end of the chapter entitled “The Sixth Day: A Steady Hand” (pp. 128-130). The culmination of this chapter ends with a pair of violent events that are narrated together, each weaving in and out of the other: China’s killing of her puppy and the tractor accident that injures Daddy.

1. What emotional effect is Ward trying to create in this scene with the description of either China or Daddy? Analyze the scene and provide textual evidence (that is brief quotations for the text, with page numbers) to back up your observations. Discuss at least 2 concrete examples.
2. Why does Ward cross-cut these two plot lines together? How does the animal one reflect on the human one (or vice versa)?
3. How do descriptions (of either China or Daddy) connect to other relevant moments or themes in the wider narrative?