

# 11. Katrina and Anthropocene Thinking

Jesmyn Ward, *Salvage the Bones*  
Smith, Blood Dazzler

ENGL133 Imagining Nature

# Course Stuff

- Writing Assignment 1 grades have been posted
- Tiny Ecologies 3 will be returned in the next week
- Make sure to bring your hard copy of Ward's *Salvage the Bones* to class with you for the next 2 weeks

# Jesmyn Ward, *Salvage the Bones* (2011)

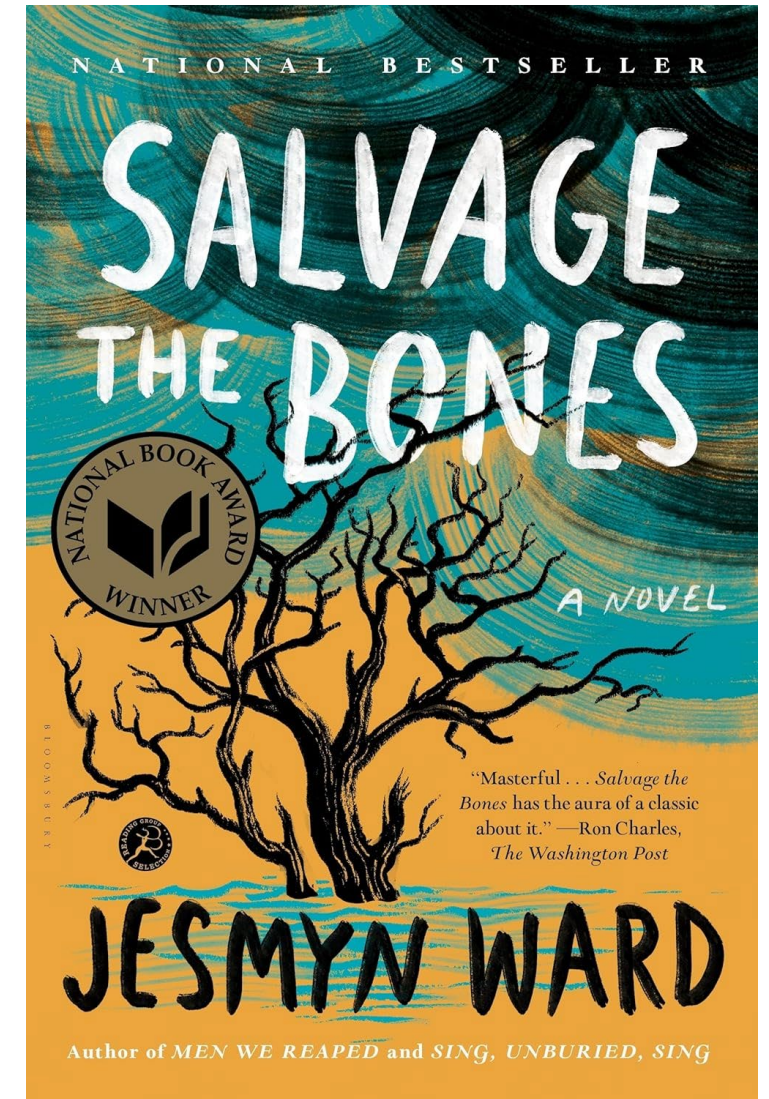


-Ward is a professor of English and Creative Writing at Tulane University

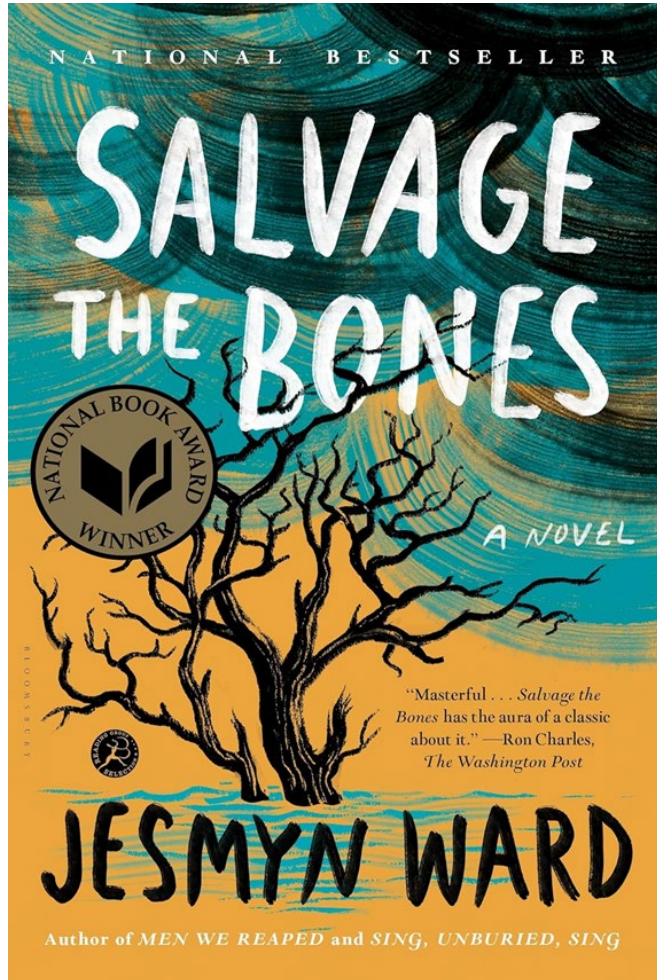
-she grew up in De Lisle, Mississippi on the Gulf Coast and was the first in her family to attend college and then went on to get an MFA at U Michigan

-two of her novels (including *Salvage the Bones*) have won the National Book Award, arguably the most prestigious award in US literature

-but *Salvage the Bones* was also the subject of attempted book bans in high schools due to its portrayal of difficult subjects like dogfighting, teenage pregnancy, and poverty







## What's the basic plot?

- tells the story of a poor African American family in the fictional Mississippi Gulf town of Bois Sauvage in the days leading up to Hurricane Katrina
- focuses on 15-year-old Esch who is pregnant and her brothers Skeetah, Randall, and Junior, and their alcoholic father, who struggles to provide for them
- these events unfold against the family's attempt to prepare for Hurricane Katrina and to survive it

## So why are we reading it?

- the novel imagines complex relationships among nature, the nonhuman world, and the members of this family
- the force of nature becomes a character in the novel
- the novel offers a modern perspective on the natural disaster that builds on the storm stories we have seen in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and Defoe's multiple accounts of the 1703 Storm
- How do humans deal with natural forces that they cannot control and to which they are necessarily subject?
- How does the moral of the storm change over time?

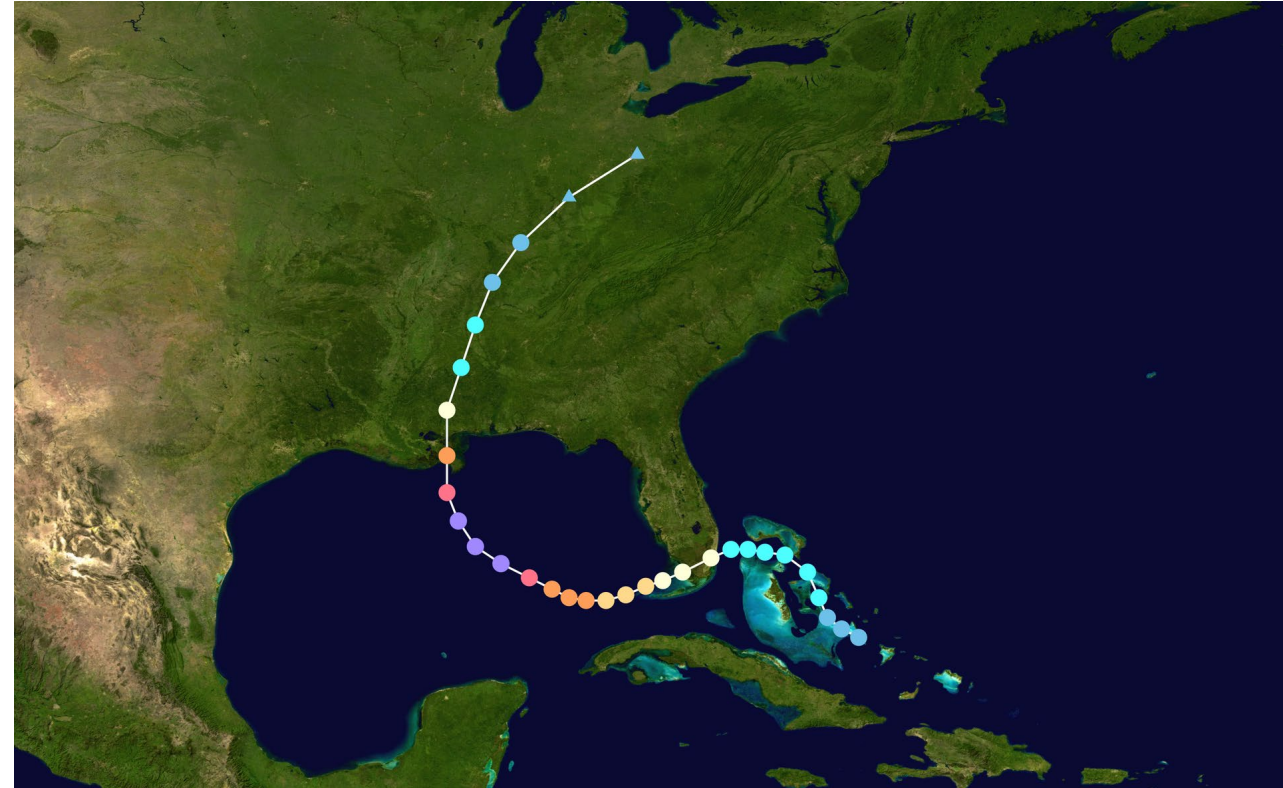
## Archive 1: *Salvage the Bones* (2011) and Hurricane Katrina (2005)

-the novel is based in part on Ward's first-hand experience of living through Katrina in DeLisle MS, the town on which *Bois Sauvage* is based

-Katrina came ashore twice the second time on August 29-first made landfall on August 25, 2005 in FL then went out into the Gulf where it picked up strength

-August 29, it made landfall again as a Category 4 hurricane, 50 miles southeast of New Orleans with winds of over 160 mph with storm surges of up to 30 feet

-while NO was spared a direct hit, its levee system failed causing the waters of Lake Pontchartrain to flood over 80% of the city by August 30th





# Impacts of Hurricane Katrina



- it took almost a week to mobilize aid and rescue operations
- an estimated 30,000 people sought shelter at the damaged NO Superdome with an additional 25,000 at the NO convention center
- shortages of food and water, daily temperatures in the 90s, and bacteria-laden floodwaters contributed to a public health emergency
- the storm resulted in 1,300 deaths and 190 billion dollars in property damage
- the largest single loss in the history of insurance
- Katrina led to the largest and the fastest mass migration in modern U.S. history with about 1.2 million people displaced in a matter of weeks
- one commentator wrote that it was “as if the entire Dust Bowl migration occurred in 14 days, or the dislocations caused by the Civil War took place on fast-forward.”
- the storm also caused significant environmental damage, including coastal erosion, habitat destruction, oil spills, and the release of other toxic chemicals





## Who or What was Responsible for the Storm Damage?

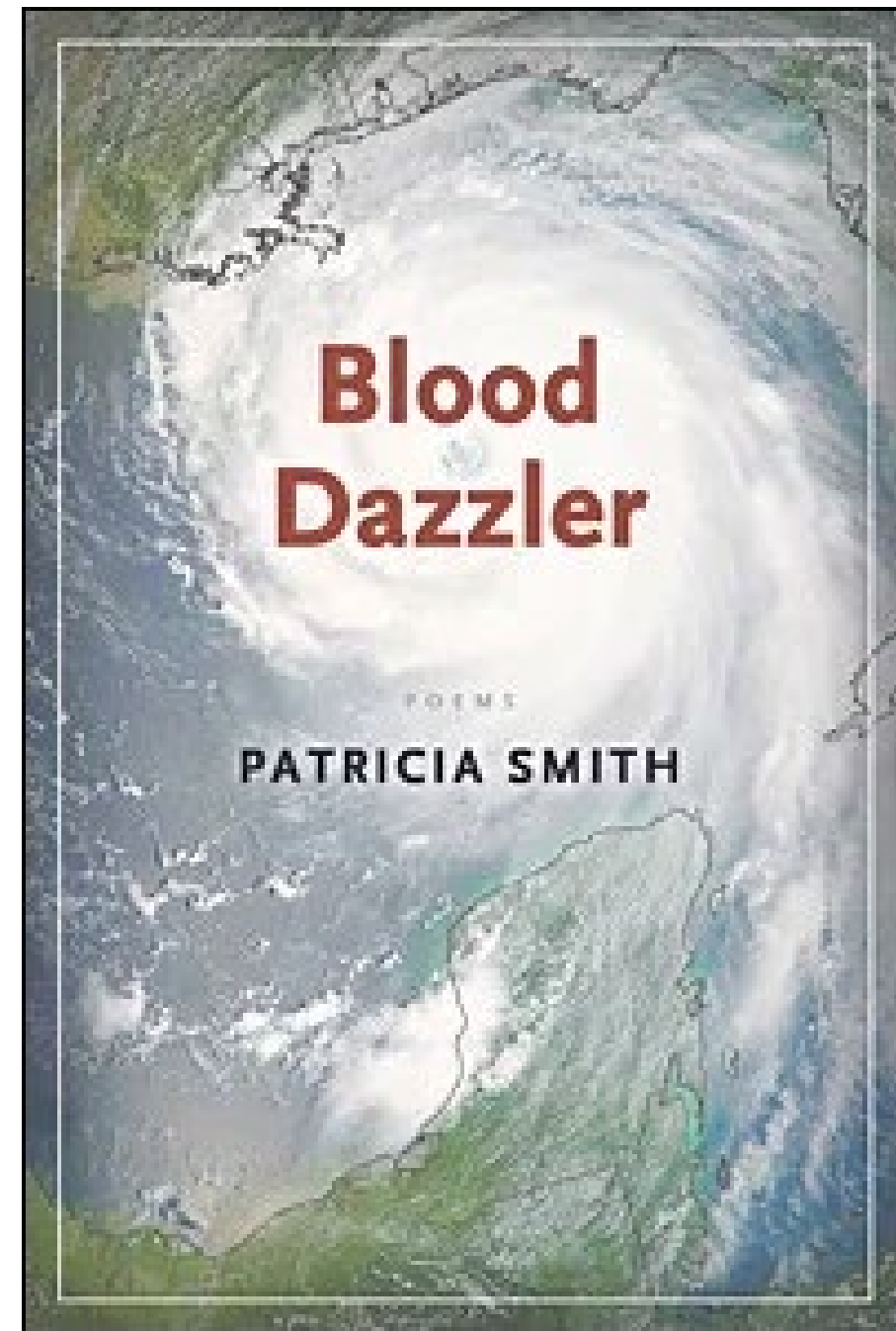
- Katrina was both a natural and a humanmade disaster
- lack of government preparation for a catastrophe of this scale, even though it had been predicted for over a decade
- multiple major investigations concluded that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers had not adequately built or maintained the breached levees and floodwalls
- most deaths were attributed to flooding caused by failed levees
- after the storm, emergency response was too slow and disorganized, especially FEMA and NOPD
- the disproportionate impact on marginalized communities in MS and LA
- the storm of immense strength with 160 mph winds
- the role of global warming? While there is natural variability in storm strength, climate scientists cite higher temps in gulf and sea level rise as contributing factors



## Katrina Archive 2: Patricia Smith's *Blood Dazzler*

- a Finalist for the National Book Awards 2008 for Poetry
- a series of poems that tracks Katrina from a tropical depression to Category Five hurricane to its aftermath
- the poems assume a variety of voices, both human (politicians, the dying, survivors) and nonhuman (Katrina herself, the Superdome)
- she writes in the persona of the suffering and the dead, including in the voice of 91 yo Ethel Freeman, who dies outside of the Convention Center and her body sits there for days in her wheelchair
- Smith: "I'm writing as a witness, not as a journalist, and I strove to point to the experiences that were so frightening because they so closely parallel our own. Writing about Ethel Freeman, I wasn't saying "Look at her." I was saying "Look at us.""

Source: <https://modernamericanpoetry.org/index.php/patricia-smith-blood-dazzler-hurricane-katrina-excerpted-interview-moira-richards>





For days, I've been offered blunt slivers  
of larger promises — even flesh,  
my sweet recurring dream,  
has been tantalizingly dangled before me.  
I have crammed my mouth with buildings,  
brushed aside skimpy altars,  
snapped shut windows to bright shatter  
with my fingers. And I've warned them, soft:  
*You must not know my name. ...*

Now officially a bitch, I'm confounded by words —  
all I've ever been is starving, fluid, and noise.  
So I huff a huge sulk, thrust out my chest,  
open wide my solo swallowing eye.  
*You must not know*

Scarlet glare fixed on the trembling crescent,

I fly. (11-12)

**Smith, “8 A.M., SUNDAY, AUGUST  
28, 2005” from *Blood Dazzler***  
*Katrina becomes a Category 5 storm, the  
highest possible rating.*

-if the environment could talk, what would it say  
about this disaster?

-How does the nonhuman witness the natural  
disaster?

-Smith uses personification and prosopopoeia  
(giving a mask or a face to a nonhuman thing)

-how does personification work in this poem?  
What is the hurricane like?

# How We Consume the Weather: Katrina in 2005



- unprecedented not just because of the devastation of the storm but how the media and social media covered it
- 2004-5 saw the expansion of social networks like Facebook, MySpace, and YouTube
- weather information on the web fueled Americans desire to consume disasters in real time
- “the first blog post about Katrina appeared the afternoon the storm struck New Orleans (August 29). From there, blogs became a source of first-person accounts” of the storm’s damage, the evacuation, and recovery efforts
- cf Defoe’s eyewitness storm accounts solicited by mail in 1703 to 2005 Katrina blogs
- 24-hour television news coverage combined with online debate made Katrina one of the first media event storms

Source: Skilton, Liz. *Tempest: Hurricane Naming and American Culture*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2019.



# Katrina: Race, Response, and Reporting

## **Response: the storm's disproportionate impact on black communities**

- most who lost their homes or were displaced were African Americans living in lower-income areas of New Orleans that were in more flood-prone areas
- Why didn't they leave? many did not have the resources to go elsewhere in advance of the storm and the mandatory evacuation order was only issued after the storm hit
- after the storm, "Black residents received on average \$8,000 less in government aid than white homeowners because of differences in housing values"

(Source: Padgett, T. (2010). New Orleans' Lower Ninth: Katrina's forgotten victim? Time Magazine)

## **Reporting: racial stereotypes in the news media**

- blacks were described as "looting" while whites were "searching for food to feed their families"
- people left in upper class white neighborhoods were described as "victims" while those left in poorer black neighborhoods were "criminals taking advantage of the chaos"
- At the Superdome, largely filled with poor African Americans who could not evacuate, media reported looting, rape, and murder—none of which turned out to be substantiated
- For example, media initially reported 200 deaths in the Superdome
  - the real total? 6 (4 died of natural causes; 1 overdose; 1 suicide)
- What is true is that the rumors of racialized crime, as much as the reality of public disorder, shaped police and emergency response to the disaster



# Why Name Nature? Why Anthropomorphize Hurricanes?



- naming hurricanes is a type of anthropomorphism

- storms not named in US before the 1950s when the National Weather Service started doing it regularly

- the gender politics of hurricane naming:

  - all hurricane names were female up to 1978- now they alternate

  - hurricanes with feminine names have higher casualties because people perceive them as less threatening and take fewer precautions

  - modeling: changing a storm's name from Charley to Eloise could triple its predicted death toll

- the names of deadly storms are retired (no more Katrina, Milton, Ian)

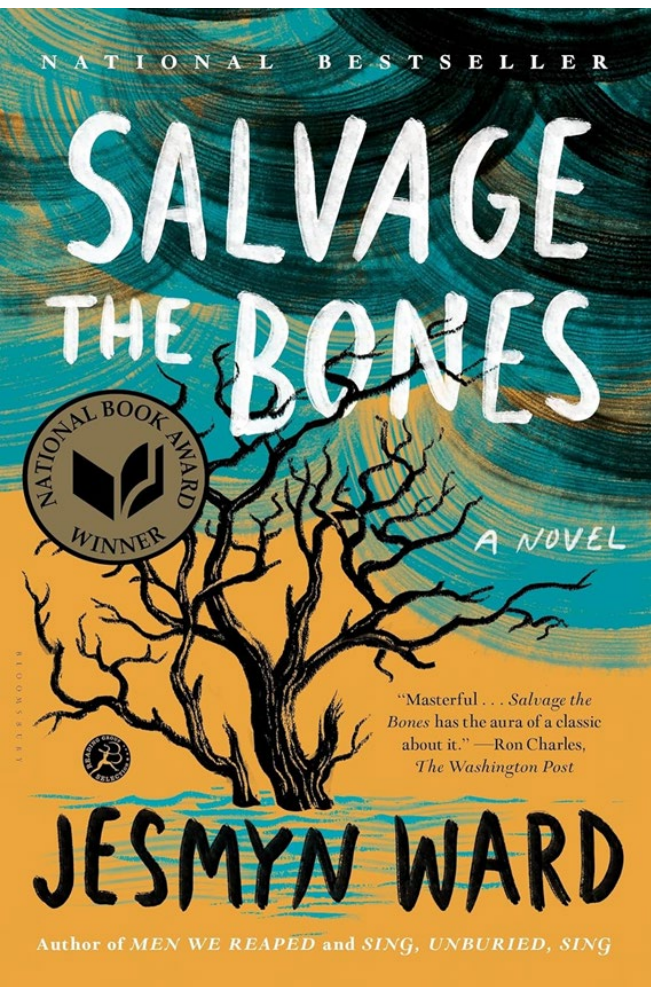
- storm names and human names

  - In 2005 1,326 babies called Katrina

  - in 2014, only 230 named Katrina

  - no one in Louisiana has used the name since 2006





## Why do we read a novel like *Salvage the Bones*?

- this is a novel about a hurricane but also about all things beyond themselves that people are subject to
  - weather and intergenerational poverty
- this is a novel about what choice means
  - to what extent do these characters have free will?
- it is also a novel about what America means
  - how is this an American epic?

## How do we read a novel?

- reading for the plot as well as reading for the art
- the promise of a novel-experiences beyond the self
- the gift of time and respecting the story

# Animals Are People Too (and Vice Versa)

China's turned on herself. If I didn't know, I would think she was trying to eat her paws. I would think that she was crazy. Which she is, in a way. ... She is birthing puppies.

What China is doing is nothing like what Mama did when she had my youngest brother, Junior. Mama gave birth in the house she bore all of us in. ... Junior came out purple and blue as a hydrangea: Mama's last flower. She touched Junior just like that when Daddy held him over her: lightly with her fingertips, like she was afraid she'd knock the pollen from him, spoil the bloom. She said she didn't want to go to the hospital. Daddy dragged her from the bed to his truck, trailing her blood, and we never saw her again. (1-2)

-the opening of any work sets out a "horizon of expectations"—that is, a contract between author and audience that raises certain expectations. These may be fulfilled or resisted but the expectations are always there.

-what expectations are raised here?

-reproduction

-nature

-what metaphor is used here?

-metaphor vs. simile

-what analogies are assumed here?

-interspecies equivalencies (animals, plants, people)



# How is the landscape a character in the novel?

-the town of Bois Sauvage?

-“wild wood” in the French creole

-What is The Pit? What do we learn about it?

-17 acres of woodland that her grandfather owned

-it is a site of environmental degradation

-also the the effect of the homographs ‘the Pit’ and ‘pit’?

It was Papa Joseph nicknamed it all the Pit, Papa Joseph who let the white men he work with dig for clay that they used to lay the foundation for houses, let them excavate the side of a hill in a clearing near the back of the property where he used to plant corn for feed. Papa Joseph let them take all the dirt they wanted until their digging had created a cliff over a dry lake in the backyard, and the small stream that had run around and down the hill had diverted and pooled into the dry lake, making it into a pond, and then Papa Joseph thought the earth would give under the water, that the pond would spread and gobble up the property and make it a swamp, so he stopped selling earth for money. (14)