

12. Katrina and Anthropocene Thinking

Jesmyn Ward, *Salvage the Bones*
and Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*

ENGL133 Imagining Nature

Course Stuff

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

Animals are People Too 2 (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 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 trancorporeality?
- what is the effect in the novel?
- How does the novel encourage us to see the relationship between humans and animals? (cf bestiaries, *Parliament of Fowls*)

Good Feelings: What Does Interspecies Love Look Like?

“Skeetah ... is focused on China like a man focuses on a woman when he feels that she is his, which China is.” (3)

“[China stands] on one side and Skeetah on the other like a pair of proud parents.” (17)

“‘You giving China a floor?’ Daddy had started on our house once he and Mama got married. ... I always thought it was something a man did for a woman when they married: build her something to live in.” (60)

“Skeetah pulls China to him by her haunches and pries open her jaw, sniffing at her tongue. He has turned from lover to father. She, his doting daughter.” (98)

At the dogfight: “China is white as the sand that will become a pearl, Skeetah black as an oyster, but they stand as one before these boys who do not know what it means to love a dog the way that Skeetah does.” (162)

When Randall finds out that Skeetah has spent all their money at the store on dog food rather than human food: “We ain’t no dogs, Randall says, And you ain’t either.” (193)

How many models of love are there?

How does Esch characterize their relationship?

How is Skeetah’s relationship to China also an economic relationship?

Ward's Environmental Epic Similes

What is an epic simile? An extended comparison that usually provides a jarring image that fixes the scene in the audience's mind

- often compares an unfamiliar thing to a more familiar thing

- builds up energy for emotional impact

- for example, in Homer's *Iliad*, Bk 16, when Patroclus kills Sarpedon with an arrow to the chest:

Sarpedon fell

As a tree falls--oak, or poplar, or spreading pine--

When carpenters cut it down in the forest

With their bright axes, to be the beam of a ship,

And he lay before his horses and chariot,

Groaning heavily and clawing the bloody dust,

Like some tawny, spirited bull a lion has killed

In the middle of the shambling herd, groaning

As it dies beneath the predator's jaws.

“His hand wrapped up to the wrist in gauze and tape so that it looked like a webworm moth nest wound tight in a pecan tree, a yarn of larvae eating at the ripe green leaves beneath to burst forth in black-winged fury in the throat-closing heat of fall. Only Daddy's hand would not emerge whole and quivering. Daddy's hand would be not the moths but the bare branches, like bones, left under the husk.” (132-133)

- for Ward, they are almost always environmental analogies

- how do they work?

- effect? challenges the idea of a separate, dominant human sphere and the inert environment

The Eighth Day: Make Them Know Setting Up the Dog Fight

-Ward's father also raised and fought pit bulls when she was young (though never sold them)

-How does the novel's structure set up this scene?

- structurally the novel pairs often events as contrasts

- 1st dog fight between China and Twist, the white farmer's dog?

- the human fight at the basketball game anticipates the dog fight in the woods

- one event often prefigures another and heightens the stakes

 - Why does Skeetah feel he needs to fight China? Randall

-“The boys have been drawn by gossip of the fight between Kilo and Boss to the clearing like the Argonauts were to Jason at the start of his adventure. They will throw their own dogs into the ring, each hoping for a good fight, a savage heart, a win, to return home from the woods, their own dangerous Aegean Sea.” (160)

-Maybe Daddy is right; maybe Katrina is coming for us. ... did Medea bless the heroes before they set out on their journey? Did she stand on the deck of that ship like I stand in this clearing, womanly ripe, and weave spells for rain to cloak her betrayal? Had Jason told her he loved her? Manny holds Kilo's leash and stares at China. Skeetah and China do not move.” (163)

-Dog fight //s the basketball game fight but also //s a Greek battle--effect?

The Fight Between Kilo and China

-why is this fight so important in the novel?

-Skeetah and Rico

-Kilo and China

-Esch and Manny (172. Manny whispering to Rico is “Jason betraying Medea”)

[China] is fire. China flings her head back into the air as if eating oxygen, gaining strength, and burns back down to Kilo and takes his neck in her teeth. She bears down, curling to him, a loving flame, and licks. She flips over and is on top of him, even though he still has her shoulder. He roils beneath her. She chews. Fire evaporates water.

Make them know make them know make them know they can't live without you, Skeetah says. China hears.

Hello, father, she says, tonguing Kilo. *I don't have milk for you*. China blazes. Kilo snaps at her breast again, but she shoulders him away. But I do have this. Her jaw is a mousetrap snapped shut around the mouse of Kilo's neck. When Kilo screams, it is loud and high, as if the wind whistles when it slides past China's teeth.

Skeetah smiles.

Skeetah calls, “Come, China!”

China spins, takes away part of Kilo's throat.

China comes.

“Hold! Hold!” Rico screams. (175-6)

Why Are the Dog Fighting Scenes So Terrible to Read?

- in addition to the terrible violence to animals, it is because of the human/ animal analogy that Ward has set up throughout the novel
- the //s between China and Esch
- the interspecies love between Skeetah and China

Why Should We Stay With the Bad Feelings?

- literature that cultivates attention to terrible facts focuses our mind on things we cannot always see clearly because of their scale: the hidden effects of intergenerational poverty and climate change, for instance
- literary language that resists ecstasy (such as that employed by the Romantics and Transcendentalists) or catharsis helps keep us grounded in the everyday and the discomfort we feel as witness, a discomfort that we, if given a choice, would normally avoid

***Salvage the Bones* as Climate Fiction**

Ward's Landscape as Character: The Bayou as Eden

-swimming at the Bay of Angels:

“Daddy used to take us swimming there when we were younger, in a little cove. The water was murkier than the river, and colder, and the bottom was a landscape of oyster shells. We dug up oysters, threw them out farther away from the cove. Marsh grass waved at the edges, and pines leaned out over the water. Pelicans floated in rows.” (84-85)

-the bayou forest in Bois Sauvage:

“There are clusters of magnolias that are so tall and green and glossy, they are impossible to climb, and the air around them always smells like peaches. There are oaks so big and old that their arms grow out black and thick as trunks, which rest on the ground. There are ponds that are filled with slime and tall yellow grasses and at night frogs turn them teeming, singing a burping chorus. There are clearing where deer feed, startle white, and kick away.” (158)

-cf. *The Tempest*, Jourdain, *A discovery of the Bermudas*

Ward's Landscape as Character: The Bayou and Environmental Degradation

Slow Violence vs the Spectacle of the Storm

In an age when the media venerate the spectacular, when public policy is shaped primarily around perceived immediate need, a central question is strategic and representational: how can we convert into image and narrative the disasters that are slow moving and long in the making, disasters that are anonymous and that star nobody, disasters that are attritional and of indifferent interest to the sensation-driven technologies of our image-world? How can we turn the long emergencies of slow violence into stories dramatic enough to rouse public sentiment and warrant political intervention, these emergencies whose repercussions have given rise to some of the most critical challenges of our time?

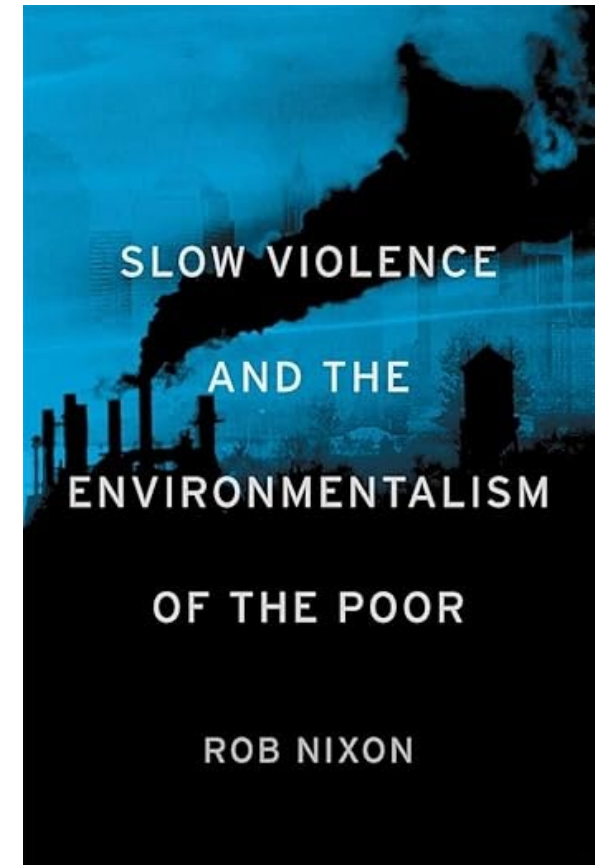
-Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, 3

Environment degradation and its effects in Ward's novel:

-the history of the Pit

[Skeetah] stumbled into a clearing where the pines has been cut brutally away so that stumps dotted the field beyond the fence like chairs that no on would ever sit on. ... When I came crashing out of the woods, I forgot to touch Skeetah, startled at the way the sky opened up at the field, the way the land looked wrong. There was too much blue" (64)

-clear cutting for resource extraction and for cattle grazing



-slow violence is hard to represent because its effects occur over long time scales and to populations that are often invisible to society at large

-harder to see and address because the agent behind slow violence cannot always be identified with certainty

-it is harder to have empathy with victims of slow violence vs. easier to have sympathy with victims of spectacular natural disasters

-how does Ward's novel contrast the slow violence of environmental degradation and the spectacular violence of the storm?

