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'Improbable Metaphor': Jesmyn Ward's Asymmetrical Anthropocene

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This article traces the ways in which the Anthropocene has led us to rethink what we mean by crisis. Crisis in the Anthropocene is no longer about a threat to a sovereign self but signals a dissolution of the sovereignty of the planet. In order to trace the shifting scales of crisis, this article reads Jesmyn Ward's 2011 Hurricane Katrina novel, *Salvage the Bones*. Katrina, I argue, offers a site at which to think through how crisis in the Anthropocene is both natural and human, epistemological and ontological. Ward's novel, I contend, offers a glimpse of the ecological interdependency of life in the Anthropocene. Ward's novel also offers an environmental account of racism and a racialized account of environmentalism. In this way, Ward's novel works through the divergent scales of crisis of life in the Anthropocene.

> We are stuck with the problem of living despite ecological ruination. Neither tales of progress nor of ruin tell us how to think about collaborative survival. It is time to pay attention to mushroom picking. Not that this will save us – but it might open our imaginations. (Tsing 2015, 19)

> But race in the United States is not a tidy matter. (Ward 2016, 16)

In the opening pages of Jesmyn Ward's 2011 National Book Award-winning novel, *Salvage the Bones,* the protagonist Esch Batiste starts to hear rumours about the arrival of Hurricane Katrina in her small Mississippi Delta town, Bois Sauvage:

> 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, drop rain, and die in the north . . . 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

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> 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. (Ward 2011, 4)

In this scene Ward uses Esch to rehearse a new mode of reading crisis. Esch's analysis of the coming storm works across racial, environmental, and economic scales. The passage starts with an acknowledgment of the inextricability of the human–nonhuman, forcing the reader to think how *beach* is a metonym for both a transgression of the human/nature binary and how this beach, with its 'summer mansions', discloses class hierarchy. Focusing on either the beach as manmade or the beach as class symbol, would either depoliticize or dematerialize the passage. The movement across these scales, however, draws attention to the ways in which climate crisis is distributed asymmetrically across geographies, both physically and socially. Moreover, in this passage Ward points to how hurricanes are racialized. The veneer of racial progress is peeled away to reveal the manner in which the legacy of slavery is the always already condition of the Mississippi delta's landscape.[1] This reaching across scales is not just contained to intersectional positions, but also occurs at the syntactic scale. Although the majority of the narrative is written in what is clearly identifiable as Esch's voice, there is a slippage in the final sentence. Esch parrots voices from the radio by moving into a pseudo-technical language that shifts the understanding of the hurricane from the lived materiality of her family hoarding into the abstracted scale of 'tropical depression'. Through this syntactic strategy, Ward is both modelling and critiquing the abstracted language of climate change. Furthermore, the sentence is almost a parody of the official lexicon of climate change that is disconnected from its felt realities. In this opening passage, Ward puts forth an understanding of Hurricane Katrina that is just as much racial and discursive as it is environmental.

This scene gets to the heart of Ward's understanding of contemporary crises. This movement across the scales of crisis, both politically and linguistically, is a strategy for Ward to capture the divergent scales of life in the Anthropocene. Ward's book offers a blueprint for fiction in the Anthropocene that is just as much concerned with the vagaries of syntax as it is with nonhuman agencies. It is not just one crisis that Ward is analysing, but the continual crisis of being both a poor African American woman in the South and the continual crisis of living through and in the Anthropocene. This ability to think across multiple scales has been heralded as the role that the literature can play in the Anthropocene. Christine Marran argues that literature's efficacy in the time of anthropogenic climate change lies in the fact that, 'One need not choose a particular scale at which to read; stories can be read at multiple scales simultaneously' (Marran 2017, 129). This is what Ward's novel does. Ward's comfort moving between these scales rehearses in miniature the type of

1. Richard Crownshaw, in a special issue of the *Journal of American Studies* dedicated to Ward, makes a similar claim in his reading of the novel: 'As Esch puts it, hurricanes have always revealed a history of slavery' (Crownshaw 2016, 227).

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couplings and assemblages that are called into being in the Anthropocene and offers a model for a new type of crisis literature.

Ward's portrayal of Hurricane Katrina offers a history of crisis on the Mississippi Delta that is environmental, racial, *and* literary, a symbiotic history of the transscalar crisis of the Anthropocene. *Salvage the Bones* follows the Batistes, an impoverished African American family living in the rural Mississippi Delta in the days leading up to, and immediately following, Hurricane Katrina. The novel is told through the eyes of Esch, the teenage and pregnant middle Batiste sister living in severe poverty. After Katrina hits, Esch surveys the damage across their fictional town, Bois Sauvage, and thinks, 'Katrina surprised everyone with her uncompromising strength, her forcefulness, the way she lingered; she made things happen that had never happened before' (Ward 2011, 248). Ward is responding to the stale coagulation of a nascent crisis canon by articulating what it means to write after Katrina has brought into being a world that 'had never happened before'. But, as Ward's novel also foregrounds, crisis is not uniform. Whereas many accounts of the Anthropocene activate a species imaginary where all humanity is bounded together in the face of climate crisis,[2] Ward's novel traces the uneven distribution of climate crisis across geographies and, even more intimately, across the bodies of Esch and her family. In this attention to the gradients and valences of the Anthropocene, Ward is able to rethink what it means to be a self in the Anthropocene, but also what shape narrative form can take to capture contemporary crises. In this article, I argue that the Anthropocene complicates the ontological import of crises in the contemporary, forcing a rethinking of the type of teleological logics often used to contain crisis to a singular moment. I then look at how Ward integrates this transscalar understanding of crisis through literary form, using syntax and metaphor to explore the implications of the Anthropocene. Finally, I turn to the ways in which Ward's work is ultimately invested in exploring the twinned history of environmental and racial oppression in the Mississippi Delta, aware of the way that race and the environment are inextricable from one another.

1. Anthropocene Crises

The question of crisis has been a defining feature of contemporary fiction. Laurent Berlant offers a diagnostic of how we now live in a contemporary that is no longer defined by the ruptures or interruptions of singular crises, but rather in a moment of ongoing 'crisis ordinariness' (Berlant 2010, 10). What this suggests, however, is not that crisis has become the defining genre of the present, but the inverse: crisis has lost its efficacy as a temporal marker.[3] Unlike an earlier understanding of crisis as an

2. Cristin Ellis charts this tendency as 'posthumanism's rhetorical tendency to invoke the human in the monolithic singular' (Ellis 2018, 140). For more on the asymmetries of the Anthropocene, see Haraway (2016) and Morton (2017).
3. In a searing polemic appropriately entitled *Anti-Crisis*, Janet Roitman describes the historicizing homogenization performed by crisis in the contemporary. 'Through the term "crisis,"' she writes,

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event 'calibrated according to its intensities and kinds of impact', crisis becomes an *environment* wherein 'structural conditions are suffused through a variety of mediations, such as predictable repetitions and other spatial practices' (Berlant 2010, 100). In the pivot from event to environment, Berlant anticipates the irruption of the Anthropocene into the current cultural imaginary. Berlant's work is not about environmental crisis as such, but Berlant's reading of the *longue dureé* of crisis-as-environment does offer a blueprint for a new way of thinking about crisis.

Crisis in the Anthropocene seems to operate on two temporal axes. On the one hand, each crisis, whether it be increasingly intense forest fires or an influx of climate migrants in the Mediterranean, feels new and urgent. Each of these events enacts a temporal and political logic of the present. But each of these singular crises belies the ways in which crisis is also part of a much longer history. A periodizing marker such as 'post-9/11' pales when stretched against the geologic record of the Anthropocene. In their historicization of the Anthropocene's many guises, Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptise Fressoz drive this home:

> As for the word 'crisis,' does it not maintain a deceptive optimism? It leads us to believe, in fact, that we are simply faced with a perilous turning-point of modernity, a brief trail with an imminent outcome, or even an opportunity. The term 'crisis' denotes a transitory state, while the Anthropocene is a point of no return. It indicates a geological bifurcation with no foreseeable return to the normality of the Holocene. (Bonneuil and Fressoz 2016, 48)

Crisis in the Anthropocene is no longer a momentary pause before the return to a pre-crisis equilibrium.[4] This is how the Anthropocene differentiates itself from previous crises. As Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009) argues, the Anthropocene signals a sea change in the core logics underpinning Western epistemology and ontology. '[Fundamental] assumptions,' he writes, 'of Western (and now universal) political thought has come undone in the crisis' (Chakrabarty 2009, 207). The Anthropocene, in this sense, is a complete rupture into the category of crisis as such.

While this may initially scan as pessimistic, there is a way to read this rupture generatively. In the moment following 9/11, for example, Judith Butler searched for 'a more general conception of the human' as a site of a collectivity after the precarious exposure to vulnerability inaugurated by crisis (Butler 2004, 31). For Butler, crises do not have to reactive the regressive and teleological impulses to restore pre-crisis norms (in this case American geopolitical imperialism). Crisis is productive in the way that it can offer a moment of recalibration when the values that defined the human were in flux. Almost two decades later, the Anthropocene signals a

'the singularity of events is abstracted by a generic logic, making crisis a term that seems self-explanatory . . . [Crisis] serves as the noun-formation of contemporary historical narrative; it is a non-locus form from which to claim access to both history and knowledge of history' (Roitman 2013, 3-4).

4. Bruno Latour puts this succinctly: 'Alas, talking about a "crisis" would be just another way of reassuring ourselves, saying that "this too will pass," the crisis "will soon be behind us." If only it were just a crisis!' (Latour 2017, 26).

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further recalibration of those values, only now it is a matter of rethinking the general conception of the world. It is not a human precarity but a planetary precarity that defines crisis in the Anthropocene. This is to shift from the ontology of the self to the ontology of the planet. It is no longer just the vulnerability and sovereignty of self that is under threat, but the very conditions that constitute our world. This is a movement from Butler's humanistic *we* to an interdependency with the world. Bruno Latour describes this as a 'counter-Copernican revolution,' where instead of looking outwards from the earth, humanity must 'now turn our gaze toward the Earth considered once again' as a porous and precarious entity (Latour 2017, 126).

Nowhere has this porosity and precarity been more evident than in accounts of Hurricane Katrina. Katrina was simultaneously a natural disaster, while also being very much a man-made crisis.[5] In her reading of the hurricane, Wai Chee Dimock describes how Katrina is instructive in the sense that it calls for an 'unbundling' that exerts pressures on fantasies of 'the sovereign claim of the nation' and, by extension, the individuals that constitute that national fantasy (Dimock 2008, 35–37). Dimock argues that Katrina offers an alternate model of reading crisis that 'makes it clear that climate, geology, and human and nonhuman life are all complexly intertwined, part of the same fluid continuum' (Dimock 2008, 49). This, however, does not mean that Katrina should be read exclusively through an ecological metric, rescaling crisis to the level of the planetary. Part of this entwinement has to do with the uneven distribution of crisis within this continuum. Equally true of Katrina was the way in which it signalled, as Henry Giroux (2005, 10) puts it, 'a return of race'.[6] Katrina at once invoked the interconnection of the human/nonhuman continuum while also drawing attention to the inequity of racialized bodies in contemporary America. It is a crisis that moved across scales, a crisis of both meteorology and racial politics simultaneously. 'Unlike the 9/11 story,' Anna Hartnell argues, 'which presented the western world with a deceptively simplistic face, Katrina immediately confronted us with its complexity, its challenge' (Hartnell 2017, 5). Like Esch's reading of hurricanes, to read one of these renderings of crisis without the other is to miss the complex ways in which they are always already entwined, animating and informing one another. Katrina asks us not to just think the Anthropocene, but to think through its asymmetries. While 9/11 offered a chance to shore-up fantasies of national and individual sovereignty, Katrina does the opposite, forcing a reckoning with the transscalar crisis of the Anthropocene.

5. As Nancy Tuana describes it, Katrina limns the 'viscous porosity between humans and our environment, between social practices and natural phenomena' (Tuana 2008, 193).
6. And in doing so, Giroux argues, it short-circuited the type of colour blind neoliberal ideology that had been trumpeted by the Bush Administration. 'Hurricane Katrina broke through the visual blackout of poverty, low-income blacks, and the pernicious ideology of color-blindness to reveal the ineptness of the government's response efforts,' he writes, 'and the dire conditions of largely poor African-Americans who were bearing the hardships incurred by the full wrath of the indifference and violence at work in the racial state' (Giroux 2005, 26–27).

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2. Literary Forms in the Anthropocene

The transscalar nature of crisis in the Anthropocene is just as much a literary problem as it is a political one. As my initial reading of Ward makes clear, it is not enough to think through just socio-economic and environmental questions without also attending to the modes through which they are mediated. Planetary crisis, in short, is an aesthetic problem for contemporary literature invested in questions of environmentalism and crisis more generally.[7] Unfortunately, contemporary crisis fiction detailing the Anthropocene has been stuck oscillating between two poles. On one side, there is science fiction and genre fiction that, as Mark McGurl (2012, 539) puts it, are 'literary forms willing to risk artistic ludicrousness in their representation of the inhumanly large and long'. While this literature certainly has its merits, it has often fallen by the wayside when it comes to mainstream commercial and critical success.[8] On the other side, there are social realist novels that graph a superficial didacticism onto otherwise non-environmental plots.[9] This was certainly the case of the most commercially successful post-Katrina text, Dave Eggers' (2009) *Zeitoun.* Although Eggers's novel attempted to offer a personalized history of a racialized body in the days following the flood, the book stagnated within the purgatory of social realism – more concerned with allowing the eponymous hero to resume his economic relations 'woven so thoroughly into the fabric of [his] adopted city' than interrogating the environmental and socio-political conditions that led up to Hurricane Katrina (Eggers 2009, 24). The brief moments of environmentalism largely go nowhere, appearing as polemic interjections into the actual plot of the text. These social realist mappings of Katrina still only work at one scale.

Timothy Morton, aware of the limits of this two-pronged paradigm for representing the crisis of the Anthropocene, writes that there is a need to '[move] beyond the simple mention of 'environmental' content, and toward the idea of environmental form' (Morton 2017, 3). What is crucial is the way that this shift in aesthetic sensibility also prefigures a political shift. Ward is asking how literary forms can help us imagine the thick and heavy ongoing crises of the Anthropocene across its scales.[10] Towards the end of the novel, Ward offers an aesthetic thesis theorizing the relationship between literary form and crisis. After the storm hits, Esch tries to sort through

7. Greg Garrard is precise in his explanation for how this representative aporia is not solely limited to Katrina. The Anthropocene, he argues, is a larger 'crisis of representation. None of the traditional forms in literature, film, or television documentary is unproblematically suited to capturing the geographical and temporal scale, complexity, and uncertainty of climate change in particular' (Garrard 2009, 709).
8. This ghettoization of the generic may be changing. The academic and commercial success of books such as Jeff Vandeer Meer's *The Southern Reach* trilogy have shown how, as Kate Marshall writes, the scale of the Anthropocene '[recasts] some of these genre questions – questions tied to the reflexive self-understanding of genre itself – in perspectival experiments and novel fictional worlds' (Marshall 2015, 529).
9. This is what Margaret Hunt Graham calls the 'didactic discourse' of environmentally-conscious social realist novels such as Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* (Graham 2014, 296).
10. As Latour (2017, 64, emphasis in original) phrases it: 'What is *just there* is fundamentally also what is *just.* Or, to put it in still another way, to *order* (in the sense of ordering the world) is to *order* (in the sense of giving orders)'.

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the detritus and debris to find a narrative frame to mediate Katrina. In a harrowing series of scenes in which Esch and her family barely survive the storm, her brother Skeetah ends up losing his prized fighting pit-bull and companion, China, to the rising waters.[11] Upset and irreconcilable, Skeetah refuses to leave the family compound while Esch and the rest of the family seek refuge. As Esch drives around with their friend Big Henry taking stock of the damage, she tries to figure out a mode in which she can 'tell [Skeetah] the story of Katrina and what she did to the coast' (Ward 2011 254):

> I will tie the glass and stone with string, hang the shards above my bed, so that they will flash in the dark and tell the story of Katrina, 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. (Ward 2011, 255)

Borrowing heavily from the Medea story that permeates the text,[12] Esch tries to imagine how narrative can stretch itself out across time and space. She finds that classical mythology offers the start of a diagram, but it also remains limited in the way that it is only temporary. This is the crisis logic I critiqued earlier, an understanding that crisis is only momentary. Katrina, however, cannot be mediated directly nor does it appear to be something that can be resolved. There is not a narrative form that is properly able to contain the complexity of the storm and the way it moves across temporal and spatial scales. Esch has to look towards nonhuman modes of writing as a way to articulate a mode of narrative interdependency that crosses the human/nonhuman threshold. Esch is looking for a way to 'tell the story of Katrina' in a form that is not properly human.

To find this form capable of capturing the scalar distortion and divergence of the Anthropocene, Ward has described an autopoetic and associative logic in her writing. This focus on image is part of the situated way in which she is trying to imagine the Batiste family and their life in Bois Sauvage. As she relays to Anna Hartnell in an extensive 2016 interview:

> When I was writing Esch in *Salvage the Bones,* I would think about the ways what she's seen, in the place where she's from, would influence the way she's seeing the world in those twelve days. On the level of language, I would think about what are the metaphors for what she would see, and what are the similes that she'd

11. Ward's choice to foreground dogfighting is both personal (a theme that returns in her memoir *Men We Reaped*), but also pointedly political. In her magisterial survey of the way in which images of race are naturalized, Claire Jean Kim points to how dogfighting by African Americans has been imagined as another contested crossing between race, animals, and the environment (Kim 2015, 4).
12. The use of the Medea frame narrative has been exhaustively detailed by Benjamin Stevens's reading of the novel. Stevens argues that the Medea story offers us a hermeneutics of 'salvage'. For Stevens *salvage* describes not an act retelling, but 'of recuperation after the fact that is at once richly creative and a reflection of impoverished necessity' (Stevens 2018, 162).

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> see, what will stand out for her, what is informing what she's seeing, giving her context for what she's seeing. (Hartnell 2016, 212)

Interdependent metaphor becomes a function of the novel's form; there is no language not inflected outside of its situated space of being. Language is always already distributed across an environmental continuum looking outside of the self for a lexicon to describe crisis. Indeed, Esch realizes this intimate cohabitation between the semiotic and somatic, thinking: 'Bodies tell stories' (Ward 2011, 83). At the level of metaphor and simile, Ward's rhetorical tropes are grounded in their very specific sense of place and environmental immanence. This is particularly clear in a description of Skeetah: 'For once he doesn't smell like dog. He smells like the constant wind that pushes the tide in over the Gulf of Mexico, but not the tide at the beach. The tide at the Bay of Angels, which smells of oysters fresh dug from the mud. Daddy used to take us swimming there when we were younger, in a little cove' (Ward 2011, 84–85). Human and nonhuman memory are tangled together, layering and pushing up against one another in a way that is not contestatory, but is co-constitutional. The text is scaling outwards only to scale back down. Esch moves transscalarly from Skeetah's body to the 'Bay of Angels' before she returns back to the scale of the personal with the image of her father swimming. This is a scale-shifting that moves between layers of being. As Esch says after eating a squirrel: 'I bite and I am eating acorns and leaping with fear to the small dark holes in the heart of the old oak trees' (Ward 2011, 48–49). There is no hierarchy, just continual displacement and substitution.

This centrifugal scaling occurs throughout the text. After their father has an accident and loses part of his hand while trying to fix his tow truck, there is a collapse between the layers of space that separate the human/nonhuman world:

> He shuffled along next to Randall, 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 flurry 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. (Ward 2011, 132–133)

The image of the tree is not quite able to describe the violence that has taken Esch's father's hand. Unable to find the generative possibility of rebirth like the larvae, Esch's father remains 'bare branches'. This image is both invasive and a literal marker of the transgressed boundary between human/nonhuman that ultimately uses ecological violence to animate a human condition. There is a residual image of invasion and environmental destruction in the warped bodies of the novel's characters.[13] This is a way of imagining climate at the intimate level of the individual

13. This is also picked up in the temporal multipolarity that Sinead Moynihan reads through the organizing trope of *recycling* in the novel. She describes this as constituting an entangled sense of being in the novel: 'The fluidity that exists between Ward's characters suggest that this is a family unit in which identities overlap, in which cooperation and empathy rather than atomization and selfishness are the distinguishing features' (Moynihan 2015, 557).

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body. This is not the harmony of the 'good Anthropocene' narrative,[14] but a violent one that thinks across the uneven distributions of climate crisis.

Yet the direction of these metaphors is not unilateral. Ward does not simply take the environmental as a reservoir from which to give depth to the people of her text. The text also uses metaphor as a reciprocal site wherein the human is able to animate the nonhuman. Sound in particular becomes a location where we see this interdependence as an animating back-and-forth that is just as concerned with the human as with the nonhuman. As Esch waits in a park for her brothers, she thinks:

> I listen for the boys and the dogs somewhere out in these woods, but all I can hear is the pine trees shushing each other, the oak bristling, the magnolia leaves hard and wide so that they sound like paper plates clattering when the wind hits them, this wind snapping before Katrina somewhere out there in the Gulf, coming like the quiet voice of someone talking before they walk through the doorway of a room. (Ward 2011, 159)

Although this may initially read like a retreat into the quietude of the pastoral, the images are still hinged to the violence of the Anthropocene as Katrina enters the text. Ward doubles down on this when Esch listens to the sound of Katrina from the attic of their quickly-flooding house:

> The dog barks loudly, fast as a drum, and something about the way the bark rises at the end reminds me of Mama's moans, of those bowing pines, of a body that can no longer hold itself together, of something on the verge of breaking. The high notes are little rips. It circles the house, its bark near and far. (Ward 2011, 223)

This is to say that metaphor in *Salvage the Bones* is not about re-establishing the centrality of a specific image or giving depth to any fixed object or character. Metaphor does not operate on one scale. Rather, metaphor is about showing how language is part of a larger ecology, always already dispersed across a world in excess of its human subjects. As Esch says during the middle of the hurricane, 'But the wind grabs my voice and snatches it out and over the pines, and drops it there to die' (Ward 2011, 205).

Ward makes this point clear in an interview that accompanies the paperback edition of the novel. In a reflection on what it was like for her mother to live through another category five storm, Hurricane Camille, Ward describes how language is frayed beyond recognition when confronted with the scalar vastness of a hurricane: '*The wind sounded like a train,* my mother said every time she told me the story, and even though the metaphor made sense, I couldn't heart it' (Ward 2011, 261; emphasis in the original). This is, however, until Katrina when Ward can understand the metaphor. 'I understood then how hurricanes, like Camille,' she explains, 'had

14. This is what someone like Clive Hamilton would call the narrative of the 'good Anthropocene' that imagines 'a belief in the ultimate benevolence of the whole, the order of things, a goodness that in the end transcends and defeats the structural obstacles, sufferings, and moral lapses that seem to threaten it' (Hamilton 2015, 234). It's also important that we do not try to romanticize or naturalize Esch's relationship to the environment. Kim describes how this type of 'intimate relationships with animals and nature' that has saturated racial rhetoric since the inception of the US, ends up creating a racialized 'fraught zone of ambiguity, menace, and transgression' (Kim 2015, 24).

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unmade the world, tree by water by house by person… Even in language, it had reduced us to improbable metaphor' (Ward 2011, 262).[15] This is what it means to write and think crisis in the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene inaugurates a literary form of 'improbable metaphor', the couplings of disparate entities that are brought into being. Ward does not just think across the divergent scales of the Anthropocene at the level of plot and content, but at the very level of language. This is a book that formalizes what it means to think through the perennial crisis of life in the Anthropocene.

Christopher Clark (2015) makes a similar point when he describes the novel's form: 'The dreamlike environment of Ward's South becomes a haze through which one's body can be confused with another' (Clark 2015, 350). This is another way of describing how the metaphors of the novel slip into their environment. When Esch looks at China, she thinks that even China's appearance is imbricated within a larger ecological and historical fabric:

> [China] looks up and her whole body shimmies like a woman down at the Oaks, a blues club set on six acres of woods and baseball diamond in the middle of Bois. They hold baseball games for black town teams every Sunday during the summer. (Ward 2011, 92)

This continues for another three paragraphs. The simile works centripetally, stretching out across time, space, and memory in a new constellation that has placed China into a larger historical and environmental continuum. The image starts with a memory of China before Esch starts to think about her own childhood and the other women in her community. This carries on through the racial history of the Delta as Esch thinks about the segregated baseball teams. This is not a metaphor that is contained to a single scale – it moves across lifeforms and history, stretching itself to make sense out of the world with words to theorize literary form in the Anthropocene

3. Race and the Environment

Salvage the Bones is both a twinned history of environmental degradation and racial oppression on the Mississippi Delta. This dual mode of the historical is literalized by the Batiste family home, The Pit. The Pit is a dugout plot of land on which Esch's house and the house of her deceased maternal grandparents are set. Esch tells the story of her maternal grandfather buying the land only to have it hollowed out from beneath him:

> Papa Joseph who let the white men he worked 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

15. This is also integrated into the plot of the text: 'Daddy has faced a category 5, but we're too young to remember the last category 5 hurricane that hit the coast: Camille, almost forty years ago. But Mama told us stories about that one' (Ward 2011, 213).

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> 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 (Ward 2011, 14).

This passage sets up a very clear register to understand Esch's version of Bois Sauvage and the Mississippi Delta. The social and geological foundation is built upon the exploited labour and resources of Mississippi's African Americans while all they are left with is dry and cracked ground. This is given form by the Pit itself, the space on which the entire narrative takes place, signalling the inequities and asymmetries of the Mississippi landscape and its excavative architecture that scaffolds the rest of the novel.[16]

This dual history of race and the environment is attempting to disavow any fantasies of sovereignty about both selves and the environment. Any attempt to delineate between these two ontologies is the work of a pre-Anthropocene fantasy. As Richard Crownshaw describes *Salvage the Bones*, 'Here, then, subjectivity is to be found forever breaking its bounds, oscillating between the world of subjects and objects, the human and the nonhuman, environmentally dispersed, or, more accurately put, ecologically constituted' (Crownshaw 2016, 228). Although his reading does not name the Anthropocene as such, this emphasis on the ecological describes its environmental mode. It is not just one crisis that Ward is navigating, but a continual crisis as it is unevenly distributed across bodies and spaces. This mode of thinking, this confrontation with the scalar vastness named by the Anthropocene shares a force with another inhuman scale, the scale of chattel slavery.

Ward's history of slavery and hurricanes that I started with point to this analogy, but it is taken up more explicitly by Christine Sharpe (2016) in what she calls wake work, where racialized subjects exist in the 'continuous and changing present of slavery's as yet unresolved unfolding' (Sharpe 2016, 13). To exist in this wake, is to be always already spread across scales confronting temporal belatedness. Indeed, Sharpe even turns to the animating possibilities of the weather as a way to describe the continued violence of racism as 'the total climate; and the climate is antiblack' wherein 'antiblackness is pervasive as climate' and, therefore, 'it is the atmospheric condition of time and place' (Sharpe 2016, 106). Sharpe is not theorizing the Anthropocene, but she is confronting a scalar vastness that is the always already condition of imagining race in the present. The violence here is not a singular crisis of one police shooting, but climatic, an atmosphere of being. This, therefore, requires an ecological interrogation of ontology as Sharpe's work is resolute in its resolve to

16. Later in the book, Esch explains how this history is also a history of hurricanes when she describes the history of her school and school district from her teacher: 'Ms. Dedeaux told us once that the elementary school used to actually be the black school before the schools were desegregated in 1969, after the last big hurricane, when people were too tired finding their relatives' uprooted bodies, reburying them, sleeping on platforms that used to be the foundation of their houses, under tents, biking or walking miles for freshwater, for food, to still fight the land outlawing segregation' (Ward 2011, 140). Hurricane and racial history are entwined here, always moving between one another.

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remain 'not interested in rescuing Black being(s) for the category of the "Human,"' by looking for modes outside of this terminal type of logic (Sharpe 2016, 116).

To return to the position where I started, this is to say that, whereas Butler was interested in rethinking the category of the human in the face of crisis, Sharpe realizes that a restituted humanity, no matter the shape, is not a possibility for certain bodies.[17] Indeed, the unresolved crises of both racial and Anthropoceneic violence means that there never was any sovereignty of the self to begin with. This is highlighted in *Salvage the Bones* when Esch finds herself coming up to the limits of her own intelligibility. In an early scene where Esch battles through morning sickness, this diffused sense of self is articulated: 'It all disappears and I wonder what I am feeding. I imagine the food turning to mush, sliding down my throat, through my body like water through a storm drain to poll in my stomach' (Ward 2011, 41). It is not just a baby that is being theorized, but also a self that becomes liquid passing through – 'a storm drain'. Esch imagines herself as part of a larger nonhuman continuum, unimaginable outside of her environmental immanence. But, also, this body is imagined as refuse – outside the human as the determinant category.

For Sharpe (2016) and for Ward, then, thinking outside determinant humanist categories is a way to reorient ontology, it is a way to begin to 'attend to, care for, comfort, and defend' new positions (Sharpe 2016, 38). It is, to return to an earlier claim, a way to rethink the very category of the world. This is what Ward is sounding out, a way to imagine what it means to be 'human debris in the middle of all the rest of it' (Ward 2011, 237). The final scene of the novel switches into the future tense to imagine a world wherein China will return from the floodwaters:

> We will sit with him here, in the strange, insect-silent dark. We will sit until we are sleepy, and then we will remain until our legs hurt … She will return, standing tall and straight, the milk burned out of here … She will know that I am a mother. (Ward 2011, 258)

Here, motherhood moves across species, forming a human/nonhuman coalition between both Esch and China. Motherhood acts as a surrogate site at which Esch can figure herself beyond the human. In this futural tense, Esch begins to create new animative possibilities and fantasies. There is no teleological closure; China is not actually going to come back, but the novel still imagines what Sharpe calls the 'otherwise' (Sharpe 2016, 117). Esch is thinking outside of the teleology of crisis by using her pregnant body to imagine a future world that scales between the micro, the bodily, and the macro, the planetary. This is at the heart of Ward's transscalar mode of fiction. It is impossible to think these scales of crises independently: to be a young African American woman in the Mississippi Delta is to live at the intersection of myriad crises. If literary form is to have any political or social efficacy, it must also be able to mediate and move between these scales. Ward's book is *barometric*, giving us a read of the weather of crisis in an Anthropocene contemporary.

17. One of Sharpe's main interlocutors, Sylvia Wynter, is precise in articulating the stakes involved for racialized bodies. '[Global] warming and climate instability,' she argues, 'confronts us and [. . .] we have to replace the ends of the *referent-we*' (Wynter 2015, 24, emphasis in original).

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Ward's attention to the asymmetric in the Anthropocene is a rebuttal to the now common argument that the Anthropocene's scalar vastness runs the risk of depoliticization. The planetary mode of Anthropocenic thinking has been productive for the ways in which it has expanded the horizon of literary theory and nonhuman agencies, but, as Matthew Taylor cautions, there is 'the danger of meeting ever-larger problems with ever-larger solutions' (Taylor 2016, 116). Indeed, ecocritical thinking in general has been critiqued for the interpellation of humanity into a monolithic entity without the valences of lived difference. But this is precisely what Ward works against. She is able to attend to both scales simultaneously, thinking through the scales of race and the environment, while also theorizing how literary form is able to attend to crisis in the Anthropocene. Sylvia Wynter argues that the contemporary is defined by the ways in which crises of race and the planet 'interact and are interconnected' (Wynter 2015, 44). What this means is that we need to develop a transscalar form of criticism that is able to think through this interconnection, and be just as attentive to the racial as the linguistic. This transscalar critique is what Ward offers in *Salvage the Bones*, a blueprint for a mode of writing in an asymmetrical Anthropocene.

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