

85% True/Minor Ecologies

Kristen Gallagher

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reviewed by Orchid Tierney

“They gorged on the corpses”:

The Ecological Encounter in Kristen Gallagher’s *85% True/Minor Ecologies*

Much has been written about the racial and gender violence that occurred during and after Hurricane Katrina in the Gulf of Mexico.⁵¹ Indeed, Katrina testifies to the persistence of apathy in sacrifice zones, where people of color are routinely ceded to the natural world, to the ecological forfeit that they must endure. Hurricanes invite racial structuring as much as they are ecological. Looking further, Katrina belongs to a larger scale of disaster. Not just a blip on the radar. Turn to Hurricane Harvey and the same systems of environmental violence that (un)natural disasters typically freight on vulnerable demographics remain in sharp focus. As photographs emerge of people fleeing into the Texan inland, those disproportionately affected will be black, female, disabled, and poor, who live in areas already prone to flooding.⁵² Hurricanes are political media.

One might argue that in the so-called post-truth and fake news era, the power of the eyewitness document and image, as media, to authenticate such disasters, to give substance to tragedy and extinction, is not immediately assured. Indeed, the environmental document—be it film or photograph—may capitalize on the logic of ‘raising awareness’ but it is often at the expense of a socio-cultural and/or historical frame that would otherwise contextualize it. The BBC’s *Planet Earth II* is a notorious example of how the documentary image crafts the fantasy of the nonhuman wilderness, while effacing the specifics of human

⁵¹ See, for example, Rachel E. Luft, “Looking for Common Ground: Relief work in Post-Katrina New Orleans as an American Parable of Race and Gender Violence,” *NWSA Journal* 20, no. 3 (2008): 5–31; Rachel E. Luft, “Racialized Disaster Patriarchy: An Intersectional Model for Understanding Disaster Ten Years after Hurricane Katrina,” *Feminist Formations* 28, no. 2 (2016): 1–26; Amanda E. Lewis, “State of the Art: Racial Apathy and Hurricane Katrina—The Social Anatomy of Prejudice in the Post-Civil Rights Era,” *Du Bois Review* 3, no. 1 (March 2006): 175–202.

⁵² See Kelly Marcias, “Hurricane Harvey poised to disproportionately impact blacks in Texas, but no one is talking about it,” *Daily Kos*, August 25, 2017, accessed August 27, 2017, <https://m.dailykos.com/stories/2017/8/25/1693142/-Hurricane-Harvey-poised-to-disproportionately-impact-blacks-in-Texas-but-no-one-is-talking-about-it>.

ecological violence on fragile sacrifice zones. Yet on the other side of this example is Kristen Gallagher's *85% True/Minor Ecologies*, where it is not truth but 'truthiness'—for want of a better word—that conveys the ambience (or maybe, even feeling) of potential ecological loss. It's not so much that events like mass starfish kills (32-34), "unannounced military exercises in biologically sensitive areas" (19), or the uncontrollable epidemic of *Argulus foliaceus*—"that domed-shelled, beady-eyed vampire of the sea" (48)—have happened, or will happen, but rather the ambience of ecological loss can be structured through the aesthetic manipulation of literary materials, whether real or imagined.

This is somewhat an extended introduction to Kristen Gallagher's *85% True/Minor Ecologies*, but one that I hope underscores her compelling stakes in the authentic document in the post-truth industrial age where ecological violence has to be mediatized before it can be fully apprehended. This hybrid collection of poetry, anthropological scholarship, and nature writing—with a hint of science fiction—is as much a challenge to the conventions of genre as it is to the conditions of partial knowing. "A rainbow coming from a cloud," writes Gallagher, for example,

a blurry rainbow encircling a cloud like the rings of Saturn. I say guys do you see that and someone else is already saying whoa before I finish. Ok it's real. We google it. Sunlight is melting ice in the clouds at our latitude. (9-11)

Writing like this deceptively nuanced. If shared sensate experiences provide partial confirmation of a rainbow, Google nonetheless renders legible the knowledge behind natural phenomenon. And it's moments like this one where Gallagher underscores the humanized constructs of ecology, where language and media meet to build the definition of a natural/unnatural world.

While both conversant with and divergent from recent ecocritical works such as Rebecca Dunham's *Cold Pastoral: Poems* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2017), Allison Cobb's *After We All Died* (Ahsahta Press, 2016), and Eric Sneathen's *Snail Poems* (Krupskaya, 2016), *85% True/Minor Ecologies* particularizes the ecological shifts happening in Florida communities of Cedar Key, Indian River County, Key Largo, Lake Wales Ridge, among others. Florida is a place of nonwestern time, where the dead and the living sometimes overlap. "[W]here the Suwanee meets the Gulf are the first signs of a human garbage collection and funeral system," Gallagher writes. "[I]t's not hard to imagine the area of the mounds as a place to commune with the dead" (13). This is a wilderness shaped by the human trace—be it Native American

middens or letterboxed photographs of dead fish (26–28). I’m reminded, here, of William Cronon’s argument that wilderness is a construct of human civilization, one that amplifies its romantic unnaturalness at the expense of its more ugly features.⁵³ There’s nothing romantic about rivers bloated with dead fish or self-mutilating starfish “ripping off its arms” (34) but such ugliness can be an expansive frame for thinking about the relationships between the human and nonhuman in pluralistic environments.

In “Codes for Extinction,” Gallagher writes,

But I do see evolution, how a thing obtains to its environment, like a tiny, dirty, matted, blue bird skidding sideways into a sandy path pecking around searching for the peanut I throw out to bring it here so I could read its leg. Like the way this scrub habitat needs lighting and wildfires to keep it short and scrubby. Like how real estate doesn’t like lightening and fire. These jays are blocking real estate. We are studying their extinction. (39–40)

Florida betrays a collision of multitudes, of plural agendas and practices, of development and estate management that competes with conservation efforts. A wildlife that encounters civilization collapses under the weight of human economics where acceptable loss is a calculated risk. Progress defines scrub jays as acceptable losses. This leads me to back to my introduction, to the hurricane and weather media events. As wildernesses change, they insist on new modes of representation that jar against structures of apathy. Those who will suffer from climate change and disaster are predominately poor, black and Hispanic. They are the acceptable loss. “It’s been raining in Okeechobee,” writes Gallagher,

Big red blobs keep forming over the word Okeechobee on the map, which means the rain is drenching and blinding over the north half of the lake, where a hurricane in 1928 killed 2,500 people, mostly African Americans, which also happens at the end of *The Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston, who draws from first-hand accounts of the storm. The hurricane burial ground sprawls for miles. That’s where it’s raining now. (11)

⁵³ William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” in William Cronon, ed., *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1995), 69–90.

Suffice to say, the climate is a barometer for the outcomes of structural racism and the whitewashing of disaster that effaces the situated experiences of people of color. Still sacrifice zones and eco-emergencies are never fully erased; they persist in oral cultures. Zora Neale Hurston dramatized the impact of Hurricane Okeechochee in her seminal novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Her fictional retelling provides a key insight to how memories of disaster can persist when state machinery attends to the apparatuses of ordained racialized and environmental apathy and amnesia. When Hurricane Okeechochee struck the coast of South Florida in 1928, its severest impact was felt by the region's poor. Approximately three quarters of farmworkers—most of whom were Black or Hispanic—perished in the floodwaters. In the aftermath, Black victims were cremated or dumped in mass gravesites, while coffins were reserved for Whites.⁵⁴ A state historical marker was finally added to one mass burial site at West Palm Beach in 2003, but only after Robert Hazard and the Storm of '28 Memorial Park Coalition campaigned extensively for ten years to have the Black victims of the hurricane recognized.⁵⁵ “My apocalyptic future fantasy has come to be all about floods,” writes Gallagher.

The world flooded, all water, a few survivors living on a series of boats tied together by rope. A flotilla city. I've been reading about it and I ask you, how are these visions not already true? How is this not a documentary about the weather? (11)

Who will be sacrificed in the coming floods that climate change will foster and humans have caused? Who will count as an acceptable loss? “Because we know it's going to happen?” writes Gallagher. “It's already happening in our minds” (11).

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⁵⁴ Russell Pfof, “Reassessing the Impact of Two Historical Florida Hurricanes,” *Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society* 84, no. 10 (2003): 1369. doi:10.1175/BAMS-84-10-1367.

⁵⁵ “The Hurricane of 1928,” *Palm Beach County History Online*, accessed July 3, 2017, <http://www.pbchistoryonline.org/page/hurricane-of>.