

Aileen J. Dingus

Jessica Weatherford

English 306

10 March, 2016

Bear the Babies, Bear the Brunt

“By slow violence, I mean a violence that occurs gradually, and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all.” (Nixon, 2)

“That night our mother went to the shop and she didn’t come back. Ever.” (Gordimer, 11) With those few words, Nadine Gordimer sums up the bleak reality that many women and children face when affected by slow violence as Rob Nixon describes it. Whether it be from erosion picking away at their fields, or from aftermath of war dooming them to becoming refugees, women and children across the globe bear the brunt of delayed destruction. In *The Ultimate Safari*, a small family of orphans, displaced by war, accompanies their grandparents across dangerous Kruger Park to reach relative safety. This story brings up important points about being women or children faced with not only the real and present dangers of wild animals or warring factions, but women and children faced with the "slow" dangers of malnutrition, access to healthcare, and the burdens women especially must take on when men aren't around.

In *The Ultimate Safari*, the family is often without any food, and almost always without nourishing food. "Little Brother" suffers the most, with a healthcare worker suggesting to his

sister that "there's something wrong with his head, she thinks it's because we didn't have enough food at home, Because of the war. Because our father wasn't there." (Gortimer, 18) More to the point, because of the war, the family lost what little it had in terms of farmland, livestock, and income.

"Our grandfather used to have three sheep and a cow and a vegetable garden but the bandits had long ago taken the sheep and the cow, because they were hungry, too; and when planting time came our grandfather had no seed to plant." (Gortimer, 12)

While this story is a fictional account, access to the benefits of healthy food is a focal point for many environmental justice studies, including that of Alison Hope Alkon and Kari Marie Norgaard, whose study *Breaking the Food Chains: An Investigation of Food Justice Activism* revealed

"Through access to land and water, black farmers and Karuk fishermen once provided the bulk of their community's food needs. Today, West Oakland residents and Karuk tribal members live in food deserts. They cannot purchase what they once produced on their own." (Hope, 300)

Alkon and Norgaard also discovered that "because of the greatly reduced ability...to provide healthy food to their community, the Karuk experience extremely high rates of hunger and disease." (Hope, 299) Diseases such as diabetes and heart disease are markedly higher in both populations that were studied, and it is attributed to the fact that the communities have been denied access to traditional food sources, such as family farms and rivers full of fish.

Little Brother's health problems also highlight another sad fact of slow violence, that of poor, indigenous peoples' inadequate access to adequate healthcare, as well as increased exposure to environmental contaminants. In their study *Indigenous Peoples of North America: Environmental Exposure and Reproductive Justice*, Elizabeth Hoover et al. examined the fact that

“Indigenous American communities face disproportionate health burdens and environmental health risks compared with the average North American population. These health impacts are issues of both environmental and reproductive justice.”
(Hoover, 1645)

What the team discovered was that after years of poor treatment and historic antagonism toward non-native governments, some native communities deliberately avoided seeking help and assisting research that would alleviate continued illness in the community.

It would be easy for some to write off Hoover's work as being “just” about Indigenous Americans, and fail to see the bigger picture of healthcare and environmental impacts on groups of lower socioeconomic standing worldwide, but a recent study *Climate change and fetal health: The impacts of exposure to extreme temperatures in New York City*, penned by Nicole S. Ngo and Radley M. Horton, researchers found that “increasing heat events from climate change could adversely impact birth weight.” (Ngo, 158) Their study focused on New York City, “not only due to its large urban population of 8.4 million, but because temperatures in NYC increased approximately 1.5°C between 1901 and 2011.” (Ngo, 158) This is obviously of worldwide concern, and even more so as we consider Little Brother's upbringing in sub-Saharan Africa. Researcher Kyle Clendinning wrote “Projections show that the African continent is likely to

warm this century with the largest temperature increases occurring in the drier sub-tropical regions.” (Clendinning) It is also interesting to note that Clendinning went on to say “As environmental resources decline due to climate change, so too will the livelihoods of those dependent upon them. Taken together, these challenges can increase the prospects for violent conflict.” (Clendinning) Since Little Brother was born during wartime, in sub-Saharan Africa, we can postulate that maternal stress, poor nutrition, and excessive heat all contributed to his health problems during and after his family’s relocation.

Nadine Gordimer contrasts Little Brother’s weakness (albeit- weakness not his fault) with the strength of Gogo, the grandmother. Interestingly enough, Gogo is the only person in *The Ultimate Safari* who is granted a name. This alone would set her apart in the story, but her actions go further. Unlike patriarchal family structure more familiar to Western readers, Gogo’s family organization is decidedly matriarchal. From the very start of the story, we see what the children’s mother had to do after their father had gone, she fixed the roof after “bandits” burned the village, she walked through a decimated village to get oil for cooking. After mother’s disappearance, Gogo took on the responsibility of the children’s safety, even though she was already dealing with a husband who had some problems of his own. Gogo scavenged for greens for the family, she sold her clothes, even her church shoes, all to help her little family make the arduous journey through Kruger Park. When it came time to make the decision to remain looking for her husband or helping the children to shelter, Gogo put her own needs aside and made sure the children were safe. Time and again she was forced by circumstance to make tough decisions, and to bear the brunt of the family’s problems.

While this matriarchal hierarchy might seem unusual to Western readers, African women in the past were traditionally farmers and cultivators. However, due to “the colonial bureaucracy’s authoritarian paternalism” (Nixon, 139), women were supplanted in their role of provider by men, often with disastrous effects, such as the soil erosion in Kenya due to deforestation that drove Wangari Maathai to start her Green Belt Movement. According to Rob Nixon, in his chapter on Maathai,

“Rural women suffered the perfect storm of dispossession: colonial land theft; the individualizing and masculinizing of property; and the experience of continuing to be the primary tillers of the land under increasingly inclement circumstances, including soil erosion and the stripping of the forests. As forests and watersheds become degraded, it was the women who had to walk the extra miles to fetch water and firewood; it was the women who had to plough and plant in once rich but now denuded land.” (Nixon, 140)

Even though it was her husband who’d had the livestock, and who had looked for the children’s mother with help from young men from the village, it was Gogo who shouldered the burden of getting everyone to safety as best as possible. “So they decided - our grandmother did; our grandfather made little noises and rocked from side to side, but she took no notice - we would go away.” (Gordimer, 12)

In this way, Gogo echos strong women of the past, including Rosie the Riveter, and even my own grandmother, Lois Allen, who was a school teacher in rural Nevada, serving mostly poor areas. In a recent biography of Allen, my mother Shirley Mink wrote:

“At one point during the summertime construction, there was a spate of vandalism, broken windows, graffiti, and the like. Sun Valley still had no law enforcement quartered in the community, so Lois decided she would prevent further damages. Every evening for a few weeks, she took her dog, drove to the school from her home in Sparks, and remained there overnight. She made sure the word got out that there would be someone in the building at night, and the vandalism stopped.” (Mink, 3)

Just as Gogo sold her belongings to ensure her family’s safety, Lois Allen did what she had to do to make sure “her” children had what they needed (ie: a school) to succeed, even though they were poor and from a rural area.

We can look at *The Ultimate Safari* as a thrilling adventure story, full of outlaws and wild animals, we can see it as a commentary on postcolonial ecotourism, or we can view it as an ecological justice piece, which reveals the delayed destruction and attritional violence that Rob Nixon describes, especially as it affects women and children. As the narrator of the story says “We were in the war, too, but we were children...we didn’t have guns. (Gordimer, 11)

Works Cited

- Alkon, Alison Hope, and Kari Marie Norgaard. "Breaking the Food Chains: An Investigation of Food Justice Activism*." *Sociological Inquiry* 79.3 (2009): 289-305. Web.
- Clendinning, Kyle. "Climate Change and Conflict: The Implications for Sub-Saharan Africa." *Earth Reform*. 23 Apr. 2012. Web. 10 Mar. 2016.
- Gordimer, Nadine. "The Ultimate Safari." *10 Years of the Caine Prize for African Writing*. Oxford: New Internationalist, 2009. Print.
- Hoover, Elizabeth, Katsi Cook, Ron Plain, Kathy Sanchez, Vi Waghiyi, Pamela Miller, Renee Dufault, Caitlin Sislin, and David O. Carpenter. "Indigenous Peoples of North America: Environmental Exposures and Reproductive Justice." *Environmental Health Perspectives* (2012). Web.
- Mink, Shirley L. "A Biography of Lois Allen." *Biography*.
- Ngo, Nicole S., and Radley M. Horton. "Climate Change and Fetal Health: The Impacts of Exposure to Extreme Temperatures in New York City." *Environmental Research* 144 (2016): 158-64. Web.
- Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2011. Print.