Beasts of the Southern Wild – The Romance of Precarity

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Part 1 by Christina Sharpe

After the opening shot of a dilapidated house, *Beasts of the Southern Wild* begins mise-en-scène with a tight close-up of the house's interior, the screen filled with small brown crossed legs, a cluttered dirty floor, and a small brown hand holding a dirty bowl, and pouring water on a mound of dirt. The camera pans up and we see the hand belongs to a little girl who is holding in her other hand a baby bird that she places gently in the dirt clod she's been molding. Then we're outside with her leaning into the strong wind; she's dressed only in an undershirt, underpants, and rubber boots. Listening to the heartbeat of a chicken, we hear her thoughts about the hidden language of heartbeats. We get Hushpuppy as the heart of the film.

The story that became *Beasts* underwent two transformations. Lucy Alibar first wrote the play *Juicy and Delicious* about a young white boy and his dying father. Then that play was transformed through Alibar's "attempt to detangle her own complicated relationship with her father in the midst of his serious illness" into the screenplay for Benh Zeitlin's film that centers on a young black girl and *her* dying father in a community called the Bathtub in coastal Louisiana. This last transformation and the introduction of black characters into the screenplay does the work of naturalizing their precarity. And the introduction of black characters at the center of the film and into communities that, as I understand from colleagues who are from Louisiana, are in reality white makes their precarity unreadable *as* precarity.

Hushpuppy and Wink are at one in and with the dirt. When such stark images appear in televised "Save the Children" ads they might move some viewers to want to help Sally Struthers feed and care for little black children, but in the US, domestic blackness rarely results in something like empathy. So Hushpuppy and Wink's blackness in the film is necessary and not incidental; it is at the heart of the "structural antagonisms" at work on and off the screen. An antagonism that structures an inability to see the black, that "rather than merely a willful refusal," is a "structural prohibition."[1]

In a brief blog post titled "Becoming Wild," Nicholas Mirzoeff writes that *Beasts* "has the dramatic achievement of being perhaps the first film to create a means to visualize climate resistance" and it "give[s] us a way to begin to imagine wild alternatives to governmentality, without sentimentalizing the prices that have to be paid for that. By mixing magical sequences with cinematic realism, it does for climate resistance what *Pan's Labyrinth* did for anti-fascism." The wilding Mirzoeff references here has to do with uncultivated, undomesticated plant life (think Topsy the plant and the violated child) and also undisciplined ways of seeing, what he calls a "wild view." But because this view, this optic, is unraced in Mirzoeff's account he can posit a "we" that resists climate change and governmentality and that is mobilized primarily through the characters of Hushpuppy and Wink. This "we" resists contending with and "papers

[1] Saidiya V. Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson, III, "The Position of the Unthought." *Qui Parle* vol. 13, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2003) 183–201 (189–190).

over any contemplation of violence as a structuring matrix–and weds us to the notion of violence as a contingent event."[2]

Mirzoeff never mentions race, but that this film (or/as "wilding") works for so many viewers has everything to do with the black bodies at its center; bodies that index those other primarily black bodies set adrift in the devastation and devastating aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, but also those working class black bodies and people who, in this culture, have continually marked a space of joy, of "making a way out of no way" and access to something like freedom (primitivism) in spite and in the face of...everything. But those bodies also index the other definition of wilding, one that entered the lexicon in 1989 when five young black men were railroaded and wrongfully convicted of the brutal rape of a young white woman in Central Park. That's how I came to understand wilding and it was a term that many people, across race, adopted to describe young black people as animals, feral and undomesticated.

It may be that "[d]isaster, survival and the physical deprivation that comes with it can, it is suggested, generate meaningful alternatives." But at least part of the disaster on view here is everyday black life lived in the wake of slavery and neither this film nor many of its viewers actually account for that life as disastrous

If one sees this film primarily as a way to visualize *resistance* to climate disaster then that requires that one have no desire to alleviate Hushpuppy's devastation; have no desire to care for a child who says, "I can count the times I been lifted on two fingers." And in that absence of care the film reveals the structural antagonism to be feeling for the figure of the black. The film *needs* black bodies because how else could incipient sexual and other violence, the violence of extreme poverty, flooding, the violence of a six-year old girl child living alone in her own ramshackle house with no mother or father, be inspiring and not tragic? How else could it "just be" with no backstory, no explanation? (We should think about casting choices for *Beast* and *Precious* next to those made in films like *Winter's Bone* and *Bastard Out of Carolina* to see the difference that race makes.)

How does a little black girl child orphaned and abandoned become a vision for climate resistance for so many people who watched the film? It is precisely this kind of misprision, this not feeling or seeing, that subtends an event like the death of Glenda Moore's sons during Hurricane Sandy. Riffing on *Invisible Man*, optic white does not see your plight.

The film ends with Hushpuppy, six, years, old, motherless, fatherless, kinless, leading a group of black and white children and adults through a causeway after pushing her father's corpse out to sea. She is caretaker, man, boy, girl, woman all within herself; she is part of the community but complete unto herself. Abandoned to precarious life.

[2] Frank Wilderson *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010) 249.

Part 2 by Jayna Brown

This film should have been a choice text for me; I love post-apocalyptic stories that end badly. But the heaps of critical praise the film has garnered don't even seem to notice it as a dystopia. "This movie is a blast of sheer, improbable joy," writes the *New York Times*, and calls it a great film to see for July 4, as it is "animated by the same spirit of freedom it sets out to celebrate." It also likens Hushpuppy to a new Huck Finn.[3]

Quvenzhané Wallis, the then six-year-old actress who plays Hushpuppy, has now been nominated for an Oscar. While I support the recognition of black talent (though I don't believe that the power of media representation stands in for any social equity) I am deeply suspicious of why she is being so celebrated. This isn't the first case of black children being depicted as insensitive to pain, or of black suffering and survival being used to symbolize American democracy.

With its dystopian landscape, the film evokes the precarity, instability and vulnerability of black life. The first shot of the film is of a shack, tipping on rickety foundations, with a door that, if you exited from it, would drop you at least fifty feet to the ground. But the film's disenfranchised subjects, black and white, are not victims, the film insists. Hushpuppy, her father Wink and the rest of the residents of the Bathtub are brave survivalists, refusing the life of the "Dry World," whose practices are in opposition to the laws of the universe. Modern man's misuse of the planet has led to ecological devastation so severe it has called forth the horrible Aurochs, Paleolithic monsters long frozen in the ice of the South Pole, as well as a terrible storm which will inevitably destroy the Bathtub. But the decision made by Wink and the other residents to stay, despite the coming storm, is politicized as an enlightened awareness and love of the free world, some kind of contract of natural man with an awful God, a righteous ascetic renunciation. The film romanticizes their abject poverty. Its wild magical realism, unlike that of *Pan's Labyrinth* by Guillermo del Toro to which it has been compared, aestheticizes the filth and destruction around them with major chords of saturated bright color.

The film calls this poverty freedom. But I don't recognize this freedom. Their existence isn't active or sustainable. It is bleak, grim and grimy, the characters' self-destructive forms of coping painfully insufficient. This is no maroon society, nor is it like any community of generationally poor people in the US or the global south I have ever seen. Instead the film recapitulates the continuing currency of black suffering, and acts as a kind of "crisis porn," showing how black pain is erotically charged.

With a heroic soundtrack, composed by the filmmaker Benh Zeitlin, the film thinks itself a grand epic in the naturalist tradition, depicting how people, stripped to bare life, both struggle against and embrace nature in its cruelty and majesty. They provide a lesson for us all; we must renew our relationship with the natural world by recognizing

[3] A.O. Scott, "She's the Man of This Swamp," *New York Times*, June 27, 2012, C1.

our animal essence and releasing the beast in all of us. We must go back and remember what it took for early man to survive if we are to continue as a species.

The film is grounded in a particular version of primitivism. It oozes a primordial mud that covers everything. At the schoolhouse, the teacher gives a lecture to the children on survival, pulling up her skirt to reveal a tattoo of primitive drawings, from, as she says, "back when we all lived in the caves." They depict early man's battles against the Aurochs. "Y'all better learn how to survive, now," is the moral of the lesson.

Hushpuppy, in her grime-covered and half-naked childlike innocence, embodies the Western fantasy of the primitive. With her whimsical exploration of the world, her little head tipped to one side as she listens to the heart of chick, or a hog, or her father, she narrates for us the wisdom of the ages, delivering the primitive's message to mankind. "The whole universe depends on everything fitting together just right," is her refrain throughout the film. "If one piece is busted, the entire universe will get busted," she warns. With her innate understanding of the beauty, precarity and cruelty of nature, Hushpuppy is able to tame the Aurochs. "'Beasts' is film as natural mystery museum," reads a review, and I did feel as if I were standing before a panorama of early man and mammoth.[4] This sense of the noble savage is clearly marked by Hushpuppy. "If daddy kill me, I ain't gonna be forgotten. I'm recording my story for scientists in the future," she says.

Like Hushpuppy's father raging against the storm, gun in one hand and bottle of gin in the other, the film's narrative core is the politics of the black family, circling around the stability, or lack of stability, in the black home. Like the critically acclaimed film *Precious* (Lee Daniels, 2009) its narrative is an American *ur* text in its staging of the black family as pathological, riven with violence and dysfunction. The poor are diseased; Precious's mother with AIDS and Hushpuppy's father with a mysterious illness that also affects his blood. Most of all, the poor cannot afford to love. "I can count the times I been lifted on two fingers," say Hushpuppy.

I had a compelling conversation with a colleague who insisted that the film was self aware, posing such pain and chronic catastrophe of poverty as unresolvable, and that the film showed a triumph of the disenfranchised to create community. I don't grant the film that complexity. I just wanted to give Hushpuppy a bath, and take her in my arms.

[4] Lisa Kennedy, "Bracing Beauty."

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