BEING PROPERTY ONCE MYSELF: IN PURSUIT OF THE ANIMAL IN 20TH CENTURY AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

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Abstract

*Being Property Once Myself: In Pursuit of the Animal in 20th century African American Literature* takes as its central focus the literary imagination, and broader ethical concerns, that have emerged from African American experiences of being configured as the socio-legal equivalents of nonhuman animals. In the midst of such systemic dehumanization, what new ways of thinking about personhood have emerged? How have black authors cultivated a poetics of persistence and interspecies empathy, a literary tradition in which animals are acting up and out in ways we might not expect or yet have a language for? At the level of structure, the dissertation is comprised of four chapters, each of which tracks a specific animal figure—the rat, the cock, the mule and the dog respectively—in the works of four 20th and 21st century authors: Richard Wright, Toni Morrison, Zora Neale Hurston, and Jesmyn Ward. I am primarily interested in how animal figures are deployed in these texts to make counter-hegemonic arguments about the nature of black social, political and *interior* life, as well as combat certain foundational claims within the western philosophical tradition regarding the limits of human subjectivity broadly construed.
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Introduction

*Being Property Once Myself: In Pursuit of the Animal in 20th Century African American Literature*, focuses on the literary imagination and broader set of ethical concerns that have emerged from African American experiences of living as socio-legal *nonpersons*: a sub-genre of the human, always already positioned in fraught proximity to animal life. Its title is a loving riff on the first two lines of the untitled Lucille Clifton poem that starts off her 1972 collection *Good News About The Earth*:

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being property once myself
i have a feeling for it,
that’s why i can talk
about environment.
what wants to be a tree,
ought to be he can be it.
same thing for other things.
same thing for men.
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And who is this good news for, exactly? Probably those who know bad news all too well, those who recognize this offer of a world in which one can re-fashion the self at will, find kin amongst (living) things, and claim a vision of human personhood rooted not in ownership, but rather the desire for recognition and care, as a world many of us are still waiting on. As is Clifton in so much of her work, I am interested in the ongoing entanglement of blackness and animality in black social, civic, and psychic life, moments where blacks and nonhuman animals are forced to live in too-close quarters, physical (the plantation, the wilderness, the kitchenette overrun with pests), legal (the coterminous valuation and sale of animals and slaves during chattel slavery) or otherwise. In the midst

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of such systemic dehumanization, what new ways of thinking about personhood have emerged? How have black authors cultivated a poetics of persistence and interspecies empathy, a literary tradition in which nonhuman—and thus also, ostensibly, non-thinking—life forms are acting up and out in ways we might not expect or yet have a language for?

For instance, how do we configure Countee Cullen’s historically ignored pair of children books, both co-authored with his cat, Christopher, within the African American literary tradition? What do we make of Henry Bibb’s explicit, outspoken jealousy of the freedoms (to move freely, to resist capture) enjoyed by snakes and birds that are wholly unavailable to slaves? These texts supply us with scenes that are difficult to incorporate into any triumphalist approach to post-Emancipation black literatures, and force us instead to grapple with a different set of questions around what the historical proximity of blacks and nonhuman animals means for how we should read bestial presence in African American letters.

Though the animating questions of this dissertation can be found long before the publication of many of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century texts which constitute its core, it is nonetheless in the writings of theorists such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Gwendolyn Brooks, Jean Toomer and others that the intersections I hope to map find their most robust expression. For example, it is Du Bois’s theorization of black persons as \textit{tertium quid}, “somewhere between men and cattle…a clownish, simple creature, at times even lovable within its limitations, but straitly foreordained to walk within the Veil”\textsuperscript{2} that motivates much of my ongoing interest in thinking of black lives as those which are often positioned outside of the

\textsuperscript{2} W. E. B. Du Bois. \textit{The Souls of Black Folk Essays and Sketches}. Charlottesville, Va.: University of Virginia Library, 1996. 64.
human-animal divide altogether, and placed elsewhere in a zone of nonbeing where the kinds of extravagant violence so often deployed against, and solely reserved for, animals is made allowable, deemed necessary in order for white civil society to function at peak performance. The nature of this dual-bind—that is, the historical experience of being configured as a not-quite-nonhuman form of life, indeed, as a human nonperson—as well as the body of literature that emerges from within that confinement, is this study’s primary concern.

Put differently, this dissertation emerges from the uneasy collision of mourning and celebration, and derives its force from the meditative tenacity of authors willing to turn to the animal kingdom, that which had so often been used as a tool of their derision and punishment, as a site of futurity and fugitivity. This is a refusal rooted in the knowledge that, as Audre Lorde reminds us, “we were never meant to survive,” a celebration not only in spite of anti-black structures of feeling, or a capitalist order predicated upon the wanton destruction of nonhuman forms of life, but a kind that employs those conditions as the very grounds for a divergent mode of being in the world. If blacks and animals are co-constructed as living flesh, but never as bodies, then what protective protocols might black authors have cultivated to celebrate the flesh, to love it as Baby Suggs, herself a physically disabled field hand characterized at one point in Toni Morrison’s Beloved as “a sixty-odd-year-old slavewoman who walks like a three-legged dog” implores us to? Often, I will argue, loving blackness comes at a high price, and is almost always linked to a refutation of the human as the only form of life worthy of mourning or ethical engagement.

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What these authors appear to be seeking, alongside the space to be properly grieved—which is to say, to be recognized as not already dead in every way that matters—is a life that is profoundly ecological, one that takes place in a social field made up of dynamic relationships not predicated solely upon domination or exploitation. In this sense, their work is extending and elaborating upon what Michel Serres has termed, in contradistinction to a social contract, a *natural contract*, a way of imagining interplay across species that foregrounds “symbiosis and reciprocity…[a contract] in which our relationship to things would set aside mastery and possession in favor of admiring attention, reciprocity, contemplation, and respect: where knowledge would no longer imply property, nor action mastery.”

Through a collective envisioning of the natural contract that doubles as a theory of blackness—which is also to say, a theory of gender and a theory of genre—these authors open up space for something like a fundamentally *black queer ecology,* an explosion of the limits imposed by a disciplinary or otherwise aversion to thinking with nonhuman forms of life at the level of the sociopolitical.

I will argue that it is precisely this commitment to engaging with the fullness of nonhuman animal worlds, as well as a profound wrestling with what it means to live in a social matrix in which one is cast as a lower order of organism, that demands sustained critical attention. Such a history begs the question: how does one delight in a precarious life? What useful blues might we find in an archive full of folks forced to write against perpetual misrecognition? My argument will be that these authors, writing as they are

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against centuries of dehumanizing discourse made material in law, literature, and various instances of everyday inequality, are able to articulate a set of ethics, and what’s more, a philosophy of mind, that is instructive for those of us interested in thinking toward a more robust vision of human, and nonhuman, cognitive and otherwise potential in the contemporary moment.

At the level of structure, this dissertation is comprised of four chapters, each of which tracks a specific animal figure—the rat, the cock, the mule and the dog respectively—in the works of four 20th and 21st century authors: Richard Wright, Toni Morrison, Zora Neale Hurston, and Jesmyn Ward. The bulk of the first chapter, which is on the role of rats in Richard Wright’s Native Son as well as his nature haiku, represents in part a traditionally masculinist imagining of African American literary production that the remainder of the monograph seeks to contend with and ultimately unmoor—a task, it bears mentioning, that is also undertaken in the bookends of the chapter itself, largely via a complication of Wright’s rendering of vermin being through an analysis of Tara Betts’s poem, “For Those Who Need A True Story” as well as a passage from Gwendolyn Brooks’s Maud Martha. The chapters that follow—on birds and the black masculine in Toni Morrison’s Song of Solomon, muleness as a black feminist modality in Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God, and the social worlds of dogs in Jesmyn Ward’s Salvage The Bones—all seek to complicate the vision of African American literature, and black expressive cultures more broadly, as a masculinist project, and to linger with what a black feminist vision of the human makes possible. By engaging in extensive close reading of the scenes in which nonhuman animals appear in these works, I hope to expound upon the counter-hegemonic, and also seemingly counter-intuitive,
ways that black authors often render animal life in their poetry and fiction. I am primarily interested in how animal figures are deployed therein in order to make arguments about the nature of black sociality, black interiority, and *black feeling*, as well as combat certain foundational claims within the western philosophical tradition regarding the limits and lacunae of personhood broadly construed.

My argument throughout *Being Property Once Myself* is that the vision of personhood offered by various writers throughout the black radical tradition represents a critique of both a Hegelian account of personhood in which “the person has for its substantive end the right of placing its will in any and every thing,”7 as well as the variant of personhood established and enforced by contemporary jurisprudence, in which “not every human being is necessarily a person, for a person is capable of rights and duties, and there may well be human beings having no legal rights, as was the case with slaves in English law….a person is such not *because he is human*, but because rights and duties are ascribed to him.”8 Thus, for those who have historically not been able to, or simply not *desired* to, exert their will in things, but have instead had to count themselves as both among and *as infinitely more than things*, there have always been other approaches to imagining how they might love and live in their flesh, what they might call such living. In response to this lived experience of moving through the world without the legal rights ascribed to the autonomous, rights-bearing, legal person—what Wynter’s oeuvre shows us is actually the figure of Man, masquerading as the only viable genre of the human

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person—African American authors have, from the very beginning, envisioned and enacted alternative ways of being human.

Over and against a world in which these authors are hunted, hemmed in on every side, how do they imagine social and political possibility? As is the case throughout the African American literary tradition, I will argue, they turn to the animal kingdom in service of such a radical project. In doing so, they present us with alternative cartographies for mapping the distinction between person and nonperson, citizen and outsider, dead and living. What emerges from this re-ordering of western philosophy’s fundamental categories is a planetary vision that is desperately needed in the present moment: a beloved community that spans the spectrum of ability, gender, race and species, and holds as its principal aim a more ethical way for us to be in the world together. A radically different set of relations is possible. As Clifton and others so beautifully demonstrate, such an order is already here, already in the works, already waiting for us in the wild.

I imagine Being Property Once Myself as an interdisciplinary project firmly situated at the nexus of black studies, animal ethics, disability theory, ecocriticism and affect studies. This particular ensemble of fields fits well together given my desire to examine both what is happening at the level of direct action in each text as well as how these texts might operate individually and in concert as toolkits for thinking about the workings of antiblackness, as well as black social and political imagination, in the material world. Being Property Once Myself is, in this respect, both a survey and an extended meditation on a particular historical phenomenon, both an account of the ongoing animalization of black peoples within a contemporary U.S. context, and a
gesture toward how we might trace the effects and affects of this particular species of antiblackness across space and time, placing it in conversation with a wide spectrum of responses from within the universe of black letters.

There are few scholars that have pulled these divergent, and largely nascent, fields together for the purposes of a larger book project. Nevertheless, there are a number of contemporary theorists with whom this dissertation is in direct conversation, including but not limited to Fred Moten, Hortense Spillers, Evie Shockley, Kimberly N. Ruffin, Kimberly K. Smith, Ian Finseth, Paul Outka, Zakkiyah Jackson, Camille Dungy, Michael Lundblad, Karen Barad, and Sylvia Wynter. Each of these thinkers work reflects a robust engagement across both field and genre that Being Property Once Myself seeks to emulate, especially as it pertains to unsettling familiar categories (e.g. “the animal” or “the body”). In the current landscape of literary theory, Being Property Once Myself is entering much larger conversations currently taking place around new materialisms, animal ontology, and the intractability of antiblack violence in our historical moment. In that vein, several academic texts have recently been released that accomplish something like the intersectional analysis of antiblackness and animalization that I am interested in pursuing in this dissertation. Spanning genre and period, each of these texts stands in one way or another as a cogent critique of the ways in which these connections have heretofore been mapped in animal studies, eco-criticism, and black studies alike.

The first text of interest in this group Camille Dungy’s fantastic anthology, Black Nature: Four Centuries of African-American Nature Poetry, a book which served in many ways as my own entrée into the subgenre of black nature writing, and pushed me from early on to think both historically and thematically about how specific animals
might be operating in African American texts at the level of trope. Taken in its totality, *Black Nature* represents the best of what one might hope for when handling the sorts of historical materials I am interested in: a collection of poetry and prose that neither obscures the horrors of racism and animalization nor traffics in a too-neat sense of collective overcoming or inevitable jubilee. What *Black Nature* does instead is wrestle with the always already fraught character of certain encounters between blacks and animals, inviting us to admire the beauty of the open without ever losing ourselves in the notion that the category of the human has a kind of coherence or inclusiveness built in.

Kimberley N. Ruffin’s *Black on Earth: African American Literary Connections* and Michael Lundblad’s *Birth of A Jungle: Animality in Progressive Era U.S. Literature and Culture* approach the gap in the literary historical archive much differently than *Black Nature*, both relying primarily on a combination of literary fiction and historical materials to make their cases, respectively, for 1.) a re-thinking of the historical relationship between black thinkers and U.S. American ecological discourse and 2.) forging a line of flight away from something like animal studies in order to engage in what Lundlbad terms *animality studies*, an intellectual project centrally concerned with the ways in which certain kinds of organic life become animalized through law, literature, and propaganda. Both Ruffin and Lundblad’s books craft a constellation of many different kinds of source material, including but not limited to film, legal theory, and visual art. This is an approach I greatly value given my own interest in stretching the boundaries of what we think of as literature or consider a viable way of doing literary theory. Another text that is in direct conversation with my current project is Marjorie Speigel’s controversial text, *The Dreaded Comparison: Human and Animal Slavery*,
which focuses primarily on the sites of overlap between chattel slavery in the Americas starting in the 17th century and what terms animal slavery: the ongoing capture and slaughter of nonhuman animals worldwide for the sake of human consumption, recreation and profit. Though I am interested in many of the same historical intersections as Spiegel, my ultimate aim is not to place chattel slavery and the exploitation of nonhuman animals side by side as a means of highlighting the ostensibly under-theorized plight of nonhuman animals, so much as to investigate the ways in which animal life operates as a site of recognition and reckoning for African American authors in the 20th century and beyond.

Outside of these collections, there is also a small group of articles that constitute what might be considered the subfield of (black) animality studies. Most germane to my project are Sara E. Johnson’s *You Should Give Them Blacks To Eat: Waging Inter-American Wars of Torture and Terror*, Spencer D. Keralis’s *Feeling Animal: Pet-Making and Mastery in The Slave’s Friend*, and Brigitte Fielder’s *Animal Humanism: Race, Species and Affective Kinship in Nineteenth-Century Abolitionism*. In conversation with one another, these three articles represent much of what I aim to cover in *Being Property Once Myself*, and, like the aforementioned texts, do so by calling upon a number of disparate genres. The Keralis article, which focuses primarily on abolitionist literature geared towards children, is especially evocative given the central role of children in 19th century debates about who and what was necessarily excluded from the province of the human. Fielder uses similar documents to slightly different ends, reading mid-19th century children’s literature to deploy a critique of traditional ways of thinking about how sympathy functioned in abolitionist texts. Against historical arguments for sympathy as
that which is most readily available when the object of it occupies a position of sameness or relative similarity, Fielder want us think about a kind of sympathy “that moves across acknowledged positions of difference” as a more representative model for what was at play in these narratives.

In contrast to both Fielder and Keralis, Johnson approaches the role of affect in human-animal relations through tracking the use of dogs “specially bred to track down and feed upon black flesh” during “the Haitian Revolution (1791–1803), the Second Maroon War in Jamaica (1795–1796), and the Second Seminole War in Territorial Florida (1835–1842), the three largest-scale conflicts pitting colonial states against African and indigenous combatants from the 1790s to the 1840s.” As it relates to my own work, Johnson’s argument about the public usage of these animals in order to create an environment of unremitting fear amongst blacks in the colonies is immensely helpful, as it establishes historical precedent for what I will argue about the use of dogs as extensions of state power after Emancipation. Collectively, Keralis, Fielder and Johnson paint a vibrant, discomfiting picture of the overlap between popular theories of animality and blackness in the 19th century; ideas that would greatly influence the way black writers approached the subject matter in subsequent decades.

Where my dissertation will differ from these existing works is that even my earliest objects of inquiry are firmly situated within the confines of the 20th century. I imagine this project as the next step in a logical progression from many of the texts I have outlined herein not only in the sense of chronology, but also at the level of genre, as I intend to incorporate close readings as well as animal philosophy, neither of which are integrated into much of the scholarship that currently makes up the subfield as I have
outlined it here. I also want to note that while there are other books and articles that take up the relationship between blacks and the natural world as their subject matter—Ian Finseth’s *Shades of Green: Nature in the Literature of American Slavery, 1770-1860*, Paul Outka’s *Race And Nature: From Transcendentalism to The Harlem Renaissance*, and Kimberly K. Smith’s *African American Environmental Thought: Foundations* immediately come to mind—there are none that I have come across which pay extensive attention to the specific set of relations which interest me, that is, the ways in which literary encounters between black folks and various forms of animal life in 20th and 20th century literature provide us with alternate models for thinking blackness and personhood in the present.

Chapter 1: *Verminsurgence*: Pestiferous Life in the work of Richard Wright

Though Richard Wright’s singular focus on the sustained threat of violent death that permeates black presence in the public sphere—as well as what such an ongoing imposition makes of black interior life and the possibility of black sociality—is under-theorized within contemporary literary theory,9 what has received even less scholarly attention are the ways in which Wright’s commitment to thinking about black death is mediated through the appearance and activity of nonhuman animals, most frequently, and most germane to this chapter, the figure of the pest. If we understand pestiferous life as that which is fundamentally disposable, so repugnant that it must be destroyed even when such erasure garners a high price, then what happens when we expand the category to

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include human lives? What social and material conditions allow for such a gratuitous marring of the human person? What makes it so that the province of the human can be so easily split between those that are allowed to flourish and those whose lives are made legible only in contrast to something like public life or citizenship, those that must be wiped out for the comfort and care of those in power?

Richard Wright’s larger corpus can be cast in one light as an extended meditation on such questions, the figure of the pest serving as one of his most effective tools in terms of his argument for a reading of black social life as that which is always already marked by a certain orientation towards danger. Wright’s central metaphor for thinking black life post-Great Migration is no noble beast, neither the oxen nor the horse that we see in early black literature’s forays into the plantation, but the figure par excellence of disposable life, and thus also black domestic life in the urban context: the rat. Though an abundance of pest animals populate Wright’s work, it is the rat which animates the scenes in his poetry and fiction that most clearly articulate his relationship to black suffering as well as black persistence, its hunger and spirited refusal to be captured which best characterize the way he portrays the persons most central to the concerns of this study: Bigger Thomas, and the anonymous speaker of his nature haiku.

It is my goal then, through an extended reading of the opening scene of Wright’s most famous novel, Native Son, to interrogate the way he imagines black life through the figure of the pest instead of against it, crafting characters that are consistently under duress, but also always in flight, always fugitive from forces seen and unseen which depend upon their subjugation for life. For Wright, black persistence is not a site of celebration so much as an occasion for mourning, a reminder that the world he and his
kin strain against is as tireless as it is resourceful. Working from such a vantage point, he provides his readers with characters that both encounter pest animals and live into a kind of pestiferous life themselves that is full of unfettered possibility. In Wright’s hands, the pest is not only that which is stalked by death but that which evades it, that which destabilizes life and death altogether, giving us something in its place akin to fugitive life, black life on the lam.

**Chapter 2: If You Surrender To The Air: Morrison, birds and the black masculine**

The dissertation’s second chapter, “If You Surrender To The Air: Morrison, Birds and the Black Masculine is centrally concerned with the following questions: how might we configure the limits and lacunae of the black masculine as a mode or means of thinking gender? What does it call into being or put under erasure the moment it arrives on the scene? What texts are available to the contemporary reader interested in parsing out the ways in which black men move through text at the level of representation and symbol, which is also to ask, what lessons do we glean from the U.S. American literary canon about *what black men are*, how they live, or whether their living is always already a spectacular kind of dying?

To be sure, there is already an extensive body of work on the ways in which Morrison’s characters open up new worlds for thinking identity across lines of perceptible difference, alternate realities that avail to us more transgressive models for configuring race, gender, and disability in particular. Still, though much has been

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written about Morrison’s work in this vein, few scholars have explored the role of nonhuman animals in Morrison’s ongoing argument against strict, bounded markers of identity that leave no room for growth or play. Such characters abound in Morrison’s fiction—Here Boy, Sethe and Denver’s dog in Beloved, the horses ridden by the tribe of blind warriors in Tar Baby, and the flock of birds that follows the titular character of Sula all come to mind—but rarely do such animal characters take center stage as a means through which a given character becomes an object of analysis. In one of Morrison’s novels in particular, Song of Solomon, I argue, Morrison’s emphasis on the presence, and most importantly the properties of animals, is notably gendered, and provides a fertile ground for imagining a theory of the black masculine grounded in literary analysis.

Put differently, I am interested here in the ways in which Toni Morrison uses animals, and birds in particular, to make a certain argument about how it feels to be a black man, how she uses them in order to critique not only the limiting, violent ways in which patriarchal black masculinity is structured, but to describe the means through which black men and boys bear such weight, how they comport themselves under the duress of everyday life as a perceived threat. Following Afaa Weaver’s suggestion that “black men are the summary of weight,” 11 the second chapter tracks the way that black masculinity as heaviness, as excess, as impediment, as vanity, as exorbitance moves through Song of Solomon in the bodies of birds, how these animals, rather paradoxically, come to signal a certain boundedness to earth, an unwieldy abundance that limits all possibility of mobility, escape or futurity. Alongside Nahum Chandler and others however, I would like to think imaginatively about what such exorbitance avails to us as

a frame for imagining alternative black masculinities, and begin with the premise of abundance rather than absence.

Chapter 3: Lords of Sounds and Lesser Things: Muleness as in Their Eyes Were Watching God

Throughout Zora Neale Hurston’s ouevre, we find any number of moments marked by the presence of nonhuman life forms that buck expectations rooted in a normative zoological framework for creaturely behavior—consider the goat that flags a train in Mules and Men, or the revenge-seeking rattlesnake in her short story, “Sweat”—but nowhere is this desire to render the insurgent potential of the marginalized, and in particular those forms of life traditionally represented as lacking even the potential for defiance, or thought, more vividly on display than in her 1937 masterwork, Their Eyes Were Watching God. Therein, Hurston crafts a world in which nonhuman animals perform species in a fashion that destabilizes and defamiliarizes normative expectations around not only animal interiority, but also animal sociality.

For this purposes of this chapter, I am interested in how Hurston’s use of the figure of the mule in particular might elucidate new pathways for thinking at the intersections of blackness, animality, and gender, how her persistent emphasis on the disparate kinds of violation, silencing, and suppression that circumscribe black women’s everyday experiences—especially when such violation is juxtaposed against spectacular scenes of violence against nonhuman animals, and explicitly linked to the experience of those animals by the text’s central characters—helps us to think not only about muleness
as a critical agent in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, but the mule as a figure of central importance in the field of black feminist thought.

My aim is to offer just this sort of alternative reading, one that strains against the grain of how the mule has historically been marked in 20th century literary criticism and elsewhere, that is, as largely or *solely* a site of gendered oppression, labor that is taken-for-granted and rendered imperceptible. Though I will argue that these regulatory forces are almost always present when the mule appears on the scene as a signifier, I will also argue that such forces are never the totality of what is present, that muleness represents not only otherworldly duress, but also the potential for an otherwise world12, that is, a radically different set of social and political relations, in the midst of and in spite of that constraint.

Further, in this chapter I seek to illuminate the ways in which a critical engagement with muleness—both as a zoological category with its own fraught history as it pertains to agriculture and subsistence farming in the Americas, as well as a useful metonym for thinking about the nature of black social life—opens up a number of different avenues through which we might approach *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as a part of Hurston’s broader corpus, in which bestial presence is always already an irruptive force to be reckoned with. I intend for this essay to reflect the inherent *multiplicity* of muleness as a means of indexing value, which is also to say, the indeterminate, uncanny workings of the black feminine in a text that is deeply concerned with how we might read persistence, even abundance, in spaces, and most centrally, *forms of human and*

nonhuman life, that are traditionally marked as non-sites, as vitalized forms of death\textsuperscript{13}. It is precisely this critical practice of valuing black and nonhuman life, over and against dominant ways of thinking about or assigning such value that, I will argue, is what Hurston wants us to consider when muleness enters the frame.

**Chapter 4: White Dogs: Kinship and U.S. racial hierarchy in *Salvage The Bones***

My final chapter will focus primarily on the role of dogs in Jesmyn Ward’s 2011 novel *Salvage The Bones*. To open, I will undertake a close reading of the Carl Philips poem, “White Dog,” in an effort to see what happens when the immediate threat of violence is removed from a poem that contains all of the other elements that have heretofore been discussed as mediating factors in the relationship between blacks and dogs. Without the looming threat of punishment, or the need for the dog to be a producer of income, how is Philips able to render his relationship to the nonhuman? What does the poem teach us about fugitivity, and the need for black elsewheres governed by different laws, different grammars of encounter and exchange?

From there, I proceed to engage in an extended reading of *Salvage The Bones*, with special emphasis on the ways in which motherhood is marshaled at the level of trope by Ward in order to unsettle normative, anthropocentric modes of imagining kinship, and relation more broadly. By crafting a constellation of human and nonhuman actors that are all explicitly marked as mothers, I argue that Ward demands the reader relinquish the impulse to flatten motherhood into solely a space of nurturing or care, and embrace a much more troubled, and troubling, view, one that fully engages with the violence of the

natural world, as well the gratuitous, ostensibly *unnatural* violence imposed by the regulatory forces of a white supremacist social order. Throughout the text, Ward imbues the sign of the mother with a certain unfettered, destructive energy, while also defamiliarizing the dogfight as always and only a space of brutal objectification. In doing both simultaneously, she creates a world within the novel wherein a reader’s most basic assumptions about the nature of violence must be challenged or cast aside altogether, eschewed in favor of a much more capacious vision of interspecies companionship and collaboration.
Verminsurgence: Pestiferous Life in the work of Richard Wright

“The question is whether such likening of the “other human” ends only in similitude or whether it authorizes, operationalizes, and becomes an ethics toward such labeled humans. In short, what are the material consequences of relegation from human being to vermin being (a pest or nuisance that must be eliminated)? The term pesticide might be innovatively used to encompass not only the substances used to kill pests but also the theory and practice of killing them….Vermin (the nonhuman) are not only pests to be controlled but also actors that coproduce and impact their would-be controllers… Since Daniel Headrick’s Tools of Empire and Alfred Crosby’s Ecological Imperialism, studies that follow the itineraries of Europeans and ‘things European’—technology, science, microbes, and so on—explain what Europeans did but not what these vermin beings ‘did back.’ ”

—Clapperton Chakanetsa Mavhunga, Vermin Being: On Pestiferous Animals and Human Game

“I was on my way to a life of bagging tiny mountains, selling poetry on the corners of North Philly, a pest to mothers & Christians. Hearing it too the cop behind me shoved me aside for he was an entomologist in a former lifetime & knew the many song structures of cicadas, bush crickets & fruit flies. He knew the complex courtship of bark beetles, how the male excavates a nuptial chamber & buries himself, his back end sticking out till a female sang a lyric of such intensity he squirmed like a Quaker & gave himself over to the quiet history of trees & ontology. All this he said while patting me down, slapping first my ribs, then sliding his palms along the sad, dark shell of my body”

—Major Jackson, Pest

Another federal lawsuit filed in 2003 by the Housing Rights Center and 19 tenants accused [Los Angeles Clippers owner Donald] Sterling of once stating his preference not to rent to Latinos because “Hispanics smoke, drink and just hang around the building.” The lawsuit also accused him of saying “black tenants smell and attract vermin.”

—Los Angeles Times, “Clippers Owner is no stranger to race-related lawsuits”

Though Richard Wright’s singular focus on the sustained threat of violent death that permeates black presence in the public sphere—as well as what such an ongoing
imposition makes of black interior life and the possibility of black sociality—is under-theorized within contemporary literary theory, what has received even less scholarly attention are the ways in which Wright’s commitment to thinking about black death is mediated through the appearance and activity of nonhuman animals, most frequently, and most germane to this study, the figure of the pest. In the interest of precision, some clarification of terms is in order:

The Oxford English Dictionary defines a pest as: ‘Any thing or person that is noxious, destructive or troublesome.’ A variety of other definitions exist in the biological literature, as for example: ‘a living organism which causes damage or illness to Man or his possessions or is otherwise in some sense, “unwanted”…but most biological definitions include some consideration of the economic significance of the damage caused. Thus ‘A pest is an organism which harms Man or his property or is likely to do so. The harm must be significant, the damage of economic importance’…This last distinction is I feel an important one: much time and effort has been devoted in the past to the control of animal populations whose activities, while doubtless of considerable nuisance value were perhaps, if the situation were viewed more objectively, of no real economic significance. In such situations costs of control quite frequently exceed the real costs of any damage caused.15

The above selection from R.J. Putnam’s 1934 text *Mammals as Pests* is instructive for my own study in its engagement with the many resonances of the term “pest,” especially as they pertain to questions of value. As Putnam makes clear, part of what qualifies a pest as such is that it by definition carries along with its body the perceived threat of economic loss or damage. It is this very characteristic that makes the pest a source of danger and its life altogether disposable, that is, the animal’s destructive orientation towards civil society and the structures, material and otherwise, which keep it intact. There is a fundamental conundrum built into this relationship, however, one that Putnam wastes little time in pointing out: more often than not, the very processes deployed in service of

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terminating pest animals come at a higher financial cost than the initial damage incurred or the overall damage projected. Put differently, the central problem that the pest poses is undoubtedly economic; it just has little to do with money. For Putnam, the wages of pestiferous life are the toll that pests take on the psychic economy of a given space, the cost to an inhabitant of letting live what does not belong, what invades or remains though it is unwanted. By virtue of its very presence, the pest puts immense pressure on the integrity of wherever it chooses to take up room, slowly sapping the sense of propriety or private ownership a given owner might lay claim to. Such an interruption, through the screen door, cabinet or kitchen sink, is also always already an irruption into the logic of private property, an untenable counter to anthropocentric conceptions of human domination and domesticity.

Pests destroy the myth of private property from the inside out, though it is not solely for this reason that they are so often made into objects of state violence and/or hailed as a threat to public health. Such reasoning often comes back instead to the threat that pests pose to the possibility of a self-contained human subjectivity, one that thrives on a certain distance from contact or contamination. A home without pests is a home in which one can ostensibly live without threat of sickness or stolen food, the sorts of everyday risks that are all too familiar to those made to live without sufficient shelter. In this sense, pests not only defamiliarize the logic of private property, they also wage war on traditional ideas of inside and outside. In “Feeling Animal: Pet-Making and Mastery in the Slave’s Friend,” Spencer D.C. Keralis writes:

Pets largely do not provide a service in the household but rather fulfill aesthetic and emotional needs for their masters. (The benefit to the pet is arguable.) Cats and dogs that serve as mousers and ratters sometimes blur this distinction, but more often a household in which animals are kept for these purposes will also include house pets not used for labor. The services provided by mousers and ratters connect them in the minds of their
nominal owners to the feral origin of their species, and the killing of vermin causes them to be perceived as unsanitary. They are excluded from the domestic sphere as “outside dogs” or “barn cats,” though sporting dogs used for hunting can be exceptions to this rule.16

According to Keralis, what is most contagious about pest animals is not any microscopic biological agent, but their nature, that which marks them as outsiders. The pest transmogrifies all that it touches—even those animals charged solely with their elimination or curtailment—into a filthy thing that has no place within the domestic sphere. In this way, the pest serves as a marker of alterity, its presence in a given space a trustworthy indicator of what goes on therein, what class or kind of person calls such filthy walls home. I would like to argue that it is this central concern with the contagious alterity of the pest that accounts for much of the violence deployed in its direction, the prevalent notion that, beyond the level of disease and discomfort, pests carry with them a disrepute that is largely incurable.

Thus, it is the central fiction of pesticide, the hunting and killing of pests solely as a practice of maintenance, cleanliness, or fiscal thrift that is of special concern here, how it is that such violence can be waged under the auspices of austerity while coming at such great financial and ethical cost. If we understand pestiferous life as that which is fundamentally disposable, so repugnant that it must be destroyed even when such erasure garners a high price, then what happens when we expand the category to include human lives? What social and material conditions allow for such a gratuitous marring of the human person? What makes it so that the province of the human can be so easily split between those that are allowed to flourish and those whose lives are made legible only in

contrast to something like public life or citizenship, those that must be wiped out for the comfort and care of those in power?

Richard Wright’s larger corpus can be cast in one light as an extended meditation on such questions, the figure of the pest serving as one of his most effective tools in terms of his argument for a reading of black social life as that which is always already marked by a certain orientation towards danger. Wright’s central metaphor for thinking black life post-Great Migration is no noble beast, neither the oxen nor the horse that we see in early black literature’s forays into the plantation, but the figure par excellence of disposable life, and thus also black domestic life in the urban context: the rat. Though an abundance of pest animals populate Wright’s work, it is the rat which animates the scenes in his poetry and fiction that most clearly articulate his relationship to black suffering as well as black persistence, its hunger and spirited refusal to be captured which best characterize the way he portrays the persons most central to the concerns of this study: Bigger Thomas, and the anonymous speaker of his nature haiku.

It is my goal then, through an extended reading of the opening scene of Wright’s most famous novel, *Native Son*, to interrogate the way he imagines black life through the figure of the pest instead of against it, crafting characters that are consistently under duress, but also always in flight, always fugitive from forces seen and unseen which depend upon their subjugation for life. For Wright, black persistence is not a site of celebration so much as an occasion for mourning, a reminder that the world he and his kin strain against is as tireless as it is resourceful. Working from such a vantage point, he provides his readers with characters that both encounter pest animals and live into a kind of pestiferous life themselves that is full of unfettered possibility. In Wright’s hands, the
pest is not only that which is stalked by death but that which evades it, that which destabilizes life and death altogether, giving us something in its place akin to fugitive life, black life on the lam.

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In an effort to better understand the opening scene of *Native Son* within the broader scope of its historical, material context, as well as more imaginatively examine the ways in which Wright’s particular emphasis on the rat as a kind of pest animal par excellence travel throughout the African American literary canon—even into the contemporary moment—the following section of a poem by Tara Betts, “For Those Who Need A True Story” (here quoted at length) is invaluable:

The landlord told Raymond’s mother that twelve dollars would be deducted from the rent for every rat killed. She sends her son to the store for a loaf of Wonder Bread and five pounds of ground beef. Young Raymond returns with bread & meat that she tears & mixes inside a metal bowl. Mama seasons the meatloaf with rat poison pulled from the cabinet beneath the sink. Well done, meat sits steaming in the middle of the kitchen floor. Then the scratching scurries. The squeaking begins and screeches toward the bowl.

Raymond describes the wave of rats like a tidal crash covering the bow, leaping over each other’s bodies then the dropping, the stutter kicks.

A chorus of rat screams ramble through Raymond’s ears. Keening, furry bodies tense paws against churning guts as they hit cracked linoleum until an hour passes. Silence swept away the din in death’s footsteps. The mother’s voice quivers in her next request. *Raymond, help me count them.*

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What Betts’s poem brings to the fore—and it is important to note here that Betts, like Wright, spent much of her adult life in Chicago and thus sets a scene for us that could easily be imagined as something akin to the South Side kitchenette which serves as this chapter’s central focus—are alternative possibilities for thinking the relationship between blacks and pest animals in domestic space, one in which the symbolism of pestiferous life lies not in its akinness to black ontology, but rather in the problem of its sheer abundance, an infestation of rats so severe that their very dying might be described as a “tidal crash” which lasts for so long that Raymond and his mother have to sit together, away from the chaos, “until an hour passes.”

The prevalence of rats in the apartment that Raymond and his mother share is a reflection not of the worth that they place on their own lives—indeed, the very planning of this elaborate killing by Raymond’s mother demonstrates a love and depth of care that should be central to any reading of this poem—but could be said to reflect the disposition of the landlord who makes the wager which serves as the poem’s first line and guiding conflict. It is the lack of value that an antiblack world places on Raymond and his mother’s lives that creates the conditions for this precarious living, these unwieldy experiments undertaken so that either of them might get through a night without being bitten. In the world that Betts constructs, rats are still representational in a sense, but in a very different way than they are for someone like Wright, or any number of other black poets that have used the persona poem as a means of entering the body of the pest, taking up its struggle, and imagining their own experience as racialized subjects as akin to vermin being.18 What we get here instead is a set of scenes that are no less radical, a work

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in which Betts dares to lay out the kind of violence that such predatory forms of capitalism inflict upon black families living at the edge. In “For Those Who Need A True Story,” rats become the only way out of an otherwise impossible situation, a means through which Raymond in his mother might plot an escape from unlivable space:

They waded through these small deaths with rubber gloves, listened to the hump of each dead rat as it rustled against the slackness of plastic bags. Raymond wanted to stop counting, but mama needed to save a dozen dollars wherever she could if they wanted to finally leave the rats behind.

After the last rat was counted, Raymond handed the bag to the landlord as proof. Here.

Enough rats to skip the rent for three months. Enough rats to avoid the fear of sweet sleeping breath leading to bitten lips. Healthy children wrapped in designer dictates Cannot describe Raymond’s fear of rabies, The smell of poison rotting from the inside out, the scratching inside the walls at night.

Those children Should find soft lives That drop pendulums in their dreams And never tell another story About the ghetto Until they’ve had to count rats With their hands.19

In grand fashion, the poem’s final stanzas unveil the broader logic behind its central action: Raymond’s mother had not planned on getting a discount on rent for the purposes of remaining in the apartment, but with an eye towards leaving it altogether. Thus, what originally appeared to be a bargaining chip (the dead rats in exchange for cheaper rent so that the family might remain in the apartment long-term) is revealed to be a first step towards flight, the dead rats serving as the only available means by which Raymond’s

19 Ibid,125.
mother might actualize a different life for her family. Betts’s final gesture towards the ways in which stories like that of Raymond and his mother are put under erasure in favor of more palatable ideas about what it might mean to inhabit a “true story”—which, as presented here, is inextricable from the tropes of cultural authenticity produced in a marketplace that places great value on one’s ability to narrativize suffering—is a move which jars upon first read, both because of its deviation from the narrative mode of the rest of the poem, but also as a compelling bit of insight into how the author demands its content be approached.

For Betts, there is another kind of violence that runs alongside the everyday danger of Raymond and his mother’s lives, the ongoing appropriation of such experiences without any engagement with what the material consequences of such living might be; what terror, what relief born of surviving what one was not meant to survive. Betts’s warning about a contemporary reading public’s attraction to the violence of urban living spaces, especially when such an obsession requires no personal investment or material presence, is instructive. What Betts demands is risk, cost, an ethics of engagement which understands “the true story” as that which makes something new and altogether different of the person who experiences it, that which shapes those who live out its strands not only as strands, but as a form of knowledge they carry with them long after the moment recedes into the archive. The true story here is one that is necessarily bound up the historical weight of the way poor black folks in Chicago have always lived, a history attended to with great care by thinkers such as Sylvia Washington, whose 2005 text *Packing Them In: An Archaeology of Environmental Racism in Chicago, 1865-1954* articulates this last point with clarity and force:
Even today, blacks as the penultimate social “others” continue to suffer disproportionately from environmental policies. As pointed out by scholars David Roediger and Matthew Frye Jacobson, previously defined non-Aryan European immigrants would eventually become absorbed into the larger “white” social body and cease to be thought of as “other” by the late 1920s. This has not been the case for blacks. Despite midcentury Civil Rights Movement and the Environmental Justice Movement, the majority of Chicago blacks still live in highly racially segregated communities that carry a disproportionate amount of environmental waste disposal facilities. The perception and treatment of blacks under segregationist policies fits Mary Poovey’s thesis of the construction of social bodies by those in power in order to isolate a segment of the larger society with the ultimate objectives of managing, manipulating, or controlling them. African Americans living in Chicago throughout the migration period were highly visible and thought of as being a “diseased” segment by the larger social body and body politic. The aggressive actions by the larger white social body to keep them essentially spatially and environmentally quarantined would lead to violence in the form of race riots and bombings, and, eventually, to de facto segregation.

Following Washington, one can read Betts’s poem as in conversation with a much longer history of systemic exclusion and state control leveraged against poor black Chicagoans since the turn of the century. Read in such a context, Raymond and his mother’s collective labor toward escaping their apartment becomes a story not only of individual survival and initiative, but of resistance against specific forms of state-sponsored subjugation. The poem’s central action doubles as an act of opposition which seeks to undermine the very system of relations which put them in that tenement in the first place, the same system which counts them as but so many expendable bodies. Their escape can thus be read as an act of insurgence, a pushing back against the psychic onslaught of a system of relations in which the lines between home and war are always already blurred, always marred beyond recognition by grime or fire. Over and against such overwhelming structural inequity, the characters that Betts creates nonetheless seek out a better home.

regarding the figure of the pest not solely as a natural enemy or obstacle, but as a means through which they might seek out a safer home.

Part of what makes Betts’s poem so critical to the philosophical considerations most germane to this study is that much of my interest in the relationship between blacks and pests is rooted in moments where the figure of the black is *inextricably* linked to the pest animal, where blackness and vermin being are yoked together within a literary scene or the social field itself. These occasions, where the dehumanizing powers of white supremacy and antiblackness operate with such force that black bodies are rendered altogether disposable and deserving of extermination, are plentiful within my archive, but they are not all that persists there. There are also stories like that of Raymond and his mother, whose relationship to pest animals could be called normative if not for the complicated nexus of relations within which their decision to kill and collect the rats in their apartment takes place. For them both, the violence they leverage against vermin is not rooted in the dominant logic described by Washington earlier in this chapter, but a different sort of conflict than has been explored within the realm of animal studies as a field of knowledge production and ongoing critique of human-animal relation.

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Unlike the primal scene in Betts’s poem, the reader is allowed no distance from the carnage in the opening scene of Wright’s masterwork. Our first encounter with the family of Bigger Thomas is one marked by jeering and blood:

Bigger aimed and let the skillet fly with a heavy grunt. There was a shattering of wood as the box caved in. The woman screamed and hid her face in her hands. Bigger tiptoed forward and peered. “I got ‘im,” he muttered, his clenched teeth bared in a smile. “By God, I got ‘im.” He kicked the splintered box out of the way and the flat black body of the rat lay exposed, its two long yellow tusks showing distinctly. Bigger took a shoe and pounded the rat’s head, crushing it, cursing hysterically: “You sonofabitch!” The woman on the bed sank to her knees and buried her face in the quilts and sobbed…”Bigger take
‘im out” Vera begged…Bigger laughed and approached the bed with the dangling rat, swinging it to and fro like a pendulum, enjoying his sister’s fear.21

From the outset, the reader’s encounter with Bigger is inextricably linked to a scene of violence that is simultaneously familiar in its constituent parts and jarring in its potential consequences. Here, we are presented with a scene in which we have an organized family, but little on the surface that resembles kinship. Though the scene begins with Bigger’s killing of the rat, ostensibly as a means of protecting his family members and/or as a means of making their shared domestic space more livable, by passage’s end Bigger’s small-scale act of extermination is exposed for what its is: force exerted for his own delight and devoid of any underlying, altruistic motivation. Bigger’s aim is to deploy suffering in as many directions as possible, torturing his younger sister with the rat’s body as soon as it becomes available for such use.

Consider too the numerous micro-performances which attend Bigger’s killing of the rat here, the heavy grunt when the skillet first leaves his hands, the smile he bares once it becomes clear that his weapon of choice has served its intended purpose. From the beginning, that Bigger Thomas derives unmitigated joy from the domination of others, irrespective of age or species, is made abundantly clear. What is less clear is how Bigger imagines he would fair against a target of greater size or strength, one he might not be so quick to attack for fear of retribution or embarrassment. In this moment, Bigger is a character beyond our immediate empathic reach, one that rejoices in the exacerbated killing of a rat—going so far even to mutilate it further with a blunt object once it is already dead—and then taunts his sister with its deceased, bleeding body. To sit with the

gruesome nature of this opening scene is to wrestle with many of the central questions of *Native Son* as a whole, questions of socialization and individual choice, a grappling at the level of the act of reading itself with what it means to spend 400 pages with a character capable of such violence and no discernible impetus other than the world we share, a world in which the argument that young men like Bigger are nothing less than ubiquitous flows too easily off the tongues of writers and policymakers alike. Wright, fully aware of such psychic resonances, nonetheless develops a protagonist who lives into that world’s worst fears, its most dangerous tropes, and in the process provides a glimpse into the depths of the antiblack public imagination.

In a similar vein, although the way animality (specifically as it pertains to the inextricability of animality and ontological violence) works thematically in this passage might appear readily obvious—that is, Bigger’s literal killing of the rat as a symbolic gesture towards the disposability of animal life, as well as the poor conditions in which city-dwelling black families of his era were forced to live—I would like to draw attention to a number of other, more subtle ways that the pest animal registers here not merely as an object of sentiment or identification for the reader, nor solely as an explanatory apparatus for the cruelty we will see from Bigger later in the novel, but indeed as a means through which Bigger himself comes to be animalized. This happens in two distinct ways, the first of which requires us to think of a moment of animalization as not simply an instance in which a human being is literally or figuratively transformed into the equivalent of an animal, but also the process by and through which such metamorphosis takes place. Put differently, I am interested not only in moments where such a transformation is complete or successful, but in the very mechanism of disaggregating
human personhood itself, in how and why certain human persons come to have their personhood revoked, and what such a theft, at the level of social standing and relation, ultimately makes of their life chances. This distinction is critical in the case of the Bigger Thomas, as the primary way in which he is animalized in *Native Son* is not through the figure of the pest, per se, but in relation to it. It is indeed the *improper* nature of the relationship between Bigger and the rat of the opening scene that marks his ever-present distance from the human, relegating him to a different space altogether, that of “the savage”:

> Between Darwin and Freud...after the end of the “peculiar institution” of slavery in the United States, dominant discourses attempted to sidestep...evolutionary narrative, suggesting instead that white men could indeed be linked more closely with “the animal” than “the savage” in terms of both “animal instincts” and common animal ancestors. A related—but less explored—move to distinguish between “civilized” white men and “savage” black men was to focus specifically on the treatment of “real” animals. Rather than delighting in torture, the civilized man could supposedly be identified by the capacity for treating not just humans but also animals “humanely.” This...discourse of human reform was born at the same moment that constructions of black men were also shifting, and, more specifically an explosion of lynchings was being justified by the myth of the black male rapist, which linked an assault on white womanhood with a savage delight in torture. Human reform actually became a new and flexible discourse for claiming superiority over various human “races,” reinforcing the logic that only the more ‘civilized’ group had evolved enough to treat other groups “humanely.”

Instead of serving as a kind of counter-representation or straining against such assumptions about the workings and limitations of black men’s affective imaginations, Wright forwards a figure that fits rather neatly into such schema. Bigger does indeed “delight in torture,” as he relishes both the killing of the rat itself and the sort of cruel teasing of his sister that its death makes possible. This decision on Wright’s behalf, to craft a character whose every action would either run counter to the palate of a respectable white readership or confirms its worst suspicions, is one that is well

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documented both by scholars of Wright and by Wright himself. But beyond this surface correlation between Bigger’s depiction and what Wright imagined a white reading audience’s reaction to such a depiction would be, it is worth noting that distancing Bigger from this particular discourse around humaneness, at bottom, also does the work of destabilizing the discourse itself. By opening the novel with a scene of such intense violence, one that immediately alienates the reader from Bigger and momentarily interrupts the potential for empathy or a certain kind of mirroring, Wright entreats us to relinquish such problematic ways of distributing value or personhood, to instead approach the protagonist he has created on its own terms.

To read *Native Son* is to encounter the inner life of a character that muddles such modes of reading and relation, and in doing so entreats the reader to ask what compels anyone to hold fast to those categories in the first instance. Taking into account Lundblad’s historical treatment of the discourse of humaneness and its relationship to the treatment of animals, what becomes readily obvious is that such thinking is at its very core invested not only in numerous falsehoods about black interior life, but also what the treatment of animals signifies in regard to one’s comportment in and toward the social world. In the scenario Lundblad lays out here, the very ones marking the various distinctions between humane and inhumane persons are those who themselves benefit from material inequality and structural violence against blacks. That such a way of thinking about animal treatment obscures the subjugation of blacks is compelling, and central to how we might imagine what Wright’s work makes possible for us in the present, a critique of those strands of contemporary animal ethics that bear an uncanny resemblance to what Lundblad gestures toward in the passage above, that is, writings
where antiblackness is put under complete erasure, removed from the chain of being altogether in favor of a social hierarchy in which white men are the sole actors.

In such a scheme, animals become either objects to be protected by whites from nonwhite savages, or one of many means by which white male civility is established and held in place. Nothing in this process accounts for antiblack violence, and what these acts might make of white male civility, or how a legacy of ongoing aggression might mar that ontological position, making it sustainable only through certain forms of domination. Every animal in the scenario Lundblad invokes is either property or available to death at a human being’s hands. This is what gives weight to the mercy of the humane individual, the notion that all life is in a position to be spared, indeed that being in relation to another entity and not enacting violence upon it is to be noted as a mark of exceptional character.

Though this logic is predicated upon a set of untenable claims, it is nonetheless at play, not as an object of mockery, but as a dominant discourse to be contended with, in *Native Son*’s opening scene. Before the reader can contend with the way Bigger approaches animal life or that of his own kin, she has to first consider the substandard living conditions that Bigger and his family move through each day. Setting the scenes in such order creates a very different image of the relationship between dehumanization and the treatment of animals than what is presented by the discourse of humaneness. The economic oppression of black women and children is our port of entry into *Native Son*, and serves as the condition of possibility for Bigger’s initial act of violence. Before there is a dead black rat’s body there is a cramped kitchenette. Before there is the inhumane treatment of any animal, there is the inhumane set of circumstances that the characters set before us have been born into, a socioeconomic world which depends on a lack of
empathy toward the black urban poor. In *12 Million Black Voices*, Wright argues:

The kitchenette fills our black boys with longing and restlessness, urging them to run off from home, to join together with other restless black boys in gangs that brutal form of city courage. The kitchenette pules up mountains of profits for the Bosses of the Buildings and makes them ever more determined to keep things the way they are. The kitchenette reaches out with fingers full of golden bribes to the officials of the city, persuading them to allow old firetraps to remain standing and occupied long after they should have been torn down. The kitchenette is the funnel through which our pulverized lives flow to ruin and death on city pavements, at a profit…”

Only a year after the publication of *Native Son*, Wright uses *12 Million Black Voices* to paint a vivid picture of the spaces in which black families were forced to live, whole “buildings which [were] dangerous for human habitation.” Thus, it is the substance of Bigger’s domestic life that serves as its own argument against reductive claims about what borders mark the proper relationship between human and animal. For Wright, the matter of Bigger’s rage and desperation is a sociological problem at root, more a result of his daily living conditions than any natural inclination towards cruelty. Wright chooses to render Bigger in a way that defies the bestialization of black boys and men not by invoking a kind of exceptionality in order to counter it, but by defamiliarizing the well-known tropes through which it functions. In her essay, “Slouching Toward Beastliness: Richard Wright’s Anatomy of Thomas Dixon,” Clare Eby writes:

Wright interrogates the white fantasy about black “beasts” through a plot centering on a legal lynching in response to a presumed rape that in fact never occurred. Wright so closely examines Dixon’s assumptions about black masculinity that *Native Son* needs to be seen as parodying the white supremacist vision. **In anatomizing the “beast,” Wright both follows and makes strategic revisions in the stereotype.** Much as [Thomas] Dixon sought, by his own admission, to correct Stowe’s influential representation of African-Americans, providing what he described as the “true story” of the South [...] so did Wright seek to amend the consequential image of the black male “beast” and, with

that, the portrait of the nation (emphasis my own).²⁴

Wright’s primary investment is in a project of reclamation and revision, in sitting with the stereotype of the black male savage so that he might write life into it, imbuing it with a fullness that keeps the reader from relinquishing his fear, or setting it aside in the name of enjoyment. In sticking with an image so firmly ingrained into the public sphere, Wright forces his audience to wrestle with Bigger, the reader’s own revulsion becoming a participant in the broader web of affect and influence that was of central concern to Wright when he crafted the text:

Like Bigger himself, I felt a mental censor—product of the fears which a Negro feels from living in America—standing over me, draped in white, warning me not to write. This censor’s warnings were translated into my own thought process thus: “What will white people think if I draw the picture of such a Negro boy? Will they not at once say: ‘See didn’t we tell you along that niggers are like that? Now, look, one of their own kind has come along and drawn the picture for us!’ ” I felt that if I drew the picture of Bigger truthfully, there would be many reactionary whites who would try to make of him something I did not intend. And yet, and this was what made it difficult, I knew that I could not write of Bigger convincingly if I did not depict him as he was: that is, resentful toward whites, sullen, angry, ignorant, emotionally unstable, depressed and unaccountable elated at times, and unable even, because of his own lack of inner organization which American oppression has fostered in him, to unite with members of his own race…The more I thought of it the more I became convinced that if I did not write Bigger as I saw and felt him, if I did not try to make him a living personality and at the same time a symbol of all the larger things I felt and saw in him, I’d be reacting as Bigger himself reacted: that is, I’d be acting out of fear if I let what I thought whites would say constrict and paralyze me.²⁵

Against the sort of thinking that would seek to render Bigger as savage or subhuman,

Wright argues for a more slippery interpretation of his central character, one that repudiates white gaze in favor of rendering black lives as those which are infinitely more intricate than any humane/inhumane binary. His description of Bigger’s roots doubles as

a refusal of a racialized pathology around violent action and perceived emotional instability. The onus here lies on the legalized forms of antiblackness that force black boys and men to live under unrelenting pressure, a pressure that Wright accounts for and emphasizes in his characterization of Bigger. Wright revises the trope of the black male savage by giving us a character that lives into its most extreme claims while never releasing us from the confines of his personal war. This characterization of Bigger’s emotional life as one which is not reducible to, but is certainly influenced by, his response to institutionalized racism and state surveillance is a staggering counterpunch to any argument in favor of Bigger’s subpersonhood or irredeemable abjection.

Wright’s unwillingness to play into a narrative of respectability and uplift exposes the myth of the savage for what it is, a way of reducing the lives of racial others that cannot bear the weight of fugitive possibility, of what happens when black authors opt out of writing explicitly against the grain of antiblack pathology and choose instead to revise it, to keep the painful tropes largely intact while remodeling their core elements. Bigger is more violent than he is kind and that is precisely the point. He is of the world that he is in. He is what the world has made him and exceedingly more. For Wright, there is no hope in narratives of uplift or respectability, no solace to be found in debating one’s humanity. Instead, Wright embraces the pathological, allowing it to free him from the expectation of writing a brighter future. The bestialization of Bigger doubles as an argument for a more capacious black personhood, one that allows for something like evil or what evil makes possible.26 The blackness Richard Wright imagines has enough room

26 Here I am thinking through and alongside Fred Moten’s talk on April 22, 2013 at Tramway in Glasgow: “Well. You just caught me giving them something I shouldn’t be giving them. We don’t want to give them anything we might want later, There’s that Howlin’ Wolf song, where he
for Bigger and whatever his opposite or apposite might be; it is the kind of empty which holds everything he needs.

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Of critical importance here are the ways in which Bigger is dehumanized not only through antiblack logics of sub-personhood that would seek to construct him as inhumane or savage, but also by environmental conditions that blur his relationship to the rat of the opening scene altogether, and ultimately render him symbolically not as the savage destroyer of animal life, but as the very animal life in question, as the pest which the exterminating forces in the book seek to uncover and destroy. In his essay “Invented by Horror: The Gothic and African-American Literary Ideology in Native Son,” James Smethurst writes:

Perhaps the most telling moment of Native Son is the book’s opening. First, an alarm clock goes off. The alarm clock ostensibly is a reminder of linear time. But in fact the alarm clock is a symbol of cyclical time marking the beginning of a day, a journey that will be almost exactly like yesterday and tomorrow. Immediately after the bell goes off, we are introduced to themes of confinement and transgressive sexuality. This transgressive sexuality is present explicitly in the shame that Bigger and his family feel about having to dress and undress in such close quarters….Then a black rat appears, both terrified and terrifying. In the first moment of doubling in the text, Bigger kills his rat double, who attacks Bigger in a fit of terror, hunger, and defiance. Bigger goes on to terrify his sister with the dead rat, enjoying her fear. Bigger’s mother prophesies a tragic end for him. End of story. But not really. There will be more rats. The slum buildings of the ghetto produce an endless stream of hungry and fearful rats. Bigger and his mother foresee Bigger’s ending even if they don’t grasp why such an ending is inevitable. But there will be more Biggers...27

Smethurst’s reading of Bigger’s inextricability from the rat of the opening scene is says, he says maybe we might want to hold on to evil. Yeah, we might need that. So maybe let’s not give them anything. Let’s not give them any adjectives. Let’s just say there’s something wrong with them. Let’s just call them bosses, and leave it at that.”

interesting primarily for what it obscures. Though he rightly picks up on the blackness of
the rat as an initial clue of its metonymic ties to Bigger—he doesn’t draw out or expand
upon this point, but his choice to gesture towards the rat’s color i.e. “then a black rat
appears, both terrified and terrifying” is important—there is, travelling along this vector
of color and feeling, this darkness and terror which inhabit the same, small body, a
strange conflation of blackness and the supposed bleakness of black social life. Reading
the alarm clock as a sign that little in Bigger’s life never changes, indeed that the black
quotidian is so devoid of energy that neither Bigger nor his family members experience
each day anew, runs contrary to the narrative trajectory of, and external dialogues
between, the characters themselves.28

What we see in actuality is a text full of characters that daily strive to make their
lives anew though those efforts are met with resistance on all sides. To understand
Bigger’s relationship to the rat as one that is purely reflective of their shared fear and
hunger, and to mark either of those states as purely negative as Smethhurst does here, is
to ignore the myriad possibilities that linking Bigger’s emotional life with that of the rat
opens up. Though the rat in this scene can certainly be read as terrified, there is just as
much evidence in the passage for a reading of the rat as a figure of insurgence, a stranger
in the Thomas home that refuses to leave or live out its days on the periphery of the
kitchenette. Instead, the rat interrupts the flow of daily life for the family. Its behavior is
certainly marked by defiance, which Smethurst admits, but it should also be noted that

28 For aren’t those morning conversations through which we are first introduced to Vera, Bigger’s
mother and the rest of the family evidence of an everyday persistence that must be recognized and
reckoned with? Isn’t this something other than emptiness or vain clawing for survival? Such
phonic materiality produces something other than what Smethurst and others want to claim as
empty space.
what Smethurst reads as defiance, or even terror, is also a product of the rat being in the world, irrespective of intention. It is the mere presence of the rat that produces terror for all those present, the fact of its living, and the supposed threat of sickness or pain that its living imposes, which produces the rat as an object of fear and hatred, a creature that can be killed with impunity. In the swift move towards such negative doubling, one made feasible, we are left to imagine, by the utter abjection of black life in “the ghetto,” Smethurst fails to account for the generative possibilities of the zoomorphism he uncovers, and thus misses out on what the figure of the rat produces, even in death, as Bigger’s doppelganger. If Smethurst is correct in his assertion that “there will be more rats. The slum buildings of the ghetto produce an endless stream of hungry and fearful rats. Bigger and his mother foresee Bigger’s ending even if they don’t grasp why such an ending is inevitable. But there will be more Biggers,” then the rat is no longer simply a site of trepidation and longing, but immortality.

For Smethurst, the rat is invulnerable. Though such a dynamic seems to depend on an interchangeability and fungibility of black lives that is altogether problematic—Smethurst’s reading of Bigger’s reproducibility is legibly bound up with an erasure of particularity or individual experience—such a reading nonetheless lends itself to a vision of an unkillable collective, a mass that rises up even and especially when one of their number is slain. Such tenacity, through hunger and over and against the material conditions of a subjugation which doubles as their condition of possibility, helps us to re-

29 Ibid, 36.

imagine the interminable flow of rats in Smethurst’s imagination as figures of resistance rather than solely abjection or despair. Bigger’s doubling here renders him both killer and deceased, a move which produces a wide array of meanings that lead us much closer not only to the image of Bigger that Wright gestures toward in “How Bigger was Born,” but also one that strains against such a pathological reading of both the world that produced Bigger and the one that currently produces what Smethurst would ostensibly read as Bigger’s descendants, the “endless stream of hungry, fearful” black boys that dodge death as daily labor. Such totalizing pessimism is avoidable given a more generous reading of the text itself; what Smethurst interprets as apocalyptic prophecy from Bigger’s mother could just as easily be seen as loving admonition:

“Suppose you wake up some morning and find your sister dead? What would you think then?” she asked. “Suppose those rats cut our veins at night when we sleep? Naw! Nothing like that ever bothers you! All you care about is your own pleasure! Even when the relief offers you a job you won’t take it till they threaten to cut off your food and starve you! Bigger, honest you the most no-countest man I ever seen in all my life!”

“You done told me that a thousand times, “ he said, not looking round.

“Well, I’m telling you agin! And mark my word, some of these days you going to set down and cry. Some of these days you going to wish you had made something out of yourself, instead of just a tramp. But it’ll be too late then.”

And later in the dialogue:

“You’ll regret how you living some day,” she went on. “If you don’t stop running with that gang of yours and do right you’ll end up where you never thought you would. You think I don’t know what you boys is doing, but I do. And the gallows is at the end of the road you travelling, boy. Just remember that.” She turned and looked at Buddy. “Throw that box outside. Buddy.”

This is certainly prophecy, but not necessarily in the way that Smethurst appears to think. Though there is a kind of prophetic forth-telling here, a naming of a present and problematic truth, this need not be interpreted solely or at all as a straightforward,

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foretelling prophecy which condemns Bigger, without mercy or hesitation, to an actual death. Such cruelty would be out of sync with Wright’s characterization of Bigger’s mother to this point. This is a moment of intense worry and fear for Bigger’s mother, a fear articulated through reference to the danger presented by the threat of rats, but one which is ultimately less about vermin as such and more about what makes their very presence, and the havoc they wreak upon the family household, possible. For Bigger’s mother, the rats are a reflection of Bigger’s unwillingness to work, their boldness the product of Bigger’s refusal to fulfill his role as eldest son, as a patriarchal figure of authority in the absence of a father that Wright never sees fit to name. The extravagance of the gallows imagery Bigger’s mother employs is less about damning her son and more about her desire to save him, to set him right and see him live a fuller life, one detached from the deathly life he invests in, to his mother’s mind, by spending time with his current cohort of friends. When Bigger tells his mother, “Stop prophesying about me,” it is has little to do with his fear of a looming death she has unique knowledge of, and more to do with the weight of her disappointment, the pain that necessarily attends such hurtful words from a parent.

This web of feeling is left unattended in Smethurst’s analysis in favor of a bleak, one-to-one correlation between Bigger and the rats that populate his home, one that misses the richness of the exchanges in this portion of the text. The rat’s grisly death is not merely a clue as to what comes later, it is a means through which the reader is more firmly grounded in the present, and made aware of the individual relationships that have helped create the protagonist we will follow through the text. We are granted greater

32 Ibid, 9.
insight into Bigger’s relationship to both Vera and his mother in this initial scene, and it is only through such insight that we can better understand any number of other ways that the rat is functioning at the level of plot device throughout the text as a whole. In *The Escape Motif in The American Novel: Mark Twain to Richard Wright*, Sam Bluefarb writes:

The opening scene of the novel is set in an urban tenement— a setting that could hardly be more appropriate for an act of escape—as distinct from those bucolic and semibucolic landscapes where most of the escapes dealt with in this study have taken place. This is the scene where the rat—that repulsive symbol of daily (and nightly!) life in the black ghetto— appears. The rat itself almost arouses our sympathy, as Bigger, who attempts to trap and kill him, will later arouse a similar compassion. However, the rat, as despicable as he is, is still a living thing. As such, if he merits revulsion, he also merits compassion; for not unexpectedly, both Bigger and the rat are (in the naturalistic mode) "victims of circumstance," inheritors of a "world they never made," blind creatures, threshing against an inscrutable force that would destroy them both, a world they would happily escape from given the opportunity. Of course, the rat of Book I will become Bigger himself. For like that rat, he too is trapped, in the first and in the last instance. Trapped as he is, however, he will try to escape his predetermined fate; and like the rat, he too will be destroyed by a frightened, uncomprehending (white) world.33

As is the case with Smethurst, Bluefarb’s reading of the rat as Bigger’s double fails to extend beyond the realm of the apocalyptic—in this case extending, explicitly, into the realm of the sympathetic—and in the process ignores a host of other possibilities made available by the novel’s opening passage as it relates to the sort of symbolic work that the relationship between Bigger and the rat takes on. Bluefarb’s analysis leaves our protagonist with too little wiggle room, spatially or otherwise, and opts instead for a rendering of Bigger’s life as one fundamentally devoid of a certain dignity or freedom; according to this logic, Bigger is like the rat primarily in that his life is a kind of void. As it is deployed here, the term “trapped” seems to connote the same sort of hopelessness

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that is all too common as far as contemporary interpretations of Bigger’s inner life are concerned. Such a move often relies on a depiction of black social life broadly construed that evacuates all potential for flourishing based on material conditions, a logic by which the “ghetto” that both Smethurst and Bluefarb invoke comes to serve as a zone of no return, a space in which nothing grows or grieves. To think of Bigger and the rat as akin to each other in the sense that Bluefarb does, that is, as powerless victims held under the weight of an invisible sovereign, is to animalize Bigger in a way that foregoes other, more interesting approaches to the text. Neither Bigger nor the rat are “blind, threshing creatures”\(^34\) in the way that Bluefarb lays out here. Lest we forget, the opening scene is not one of total domination or swift defeat, but of an extensive back-and-forth between Bigger and the invasive pest, a conflict in which Bigger eventually emerges victorious. Lest we forget, Bigger is set on the defensive at the very beginning, when he is forced to contend with the rat’s firm grip on his pant leg, the moment itself a reflection of its refusal to remain hidden or die in the shadows of the too-small room. The initial conflict between the rat and Bigger is an occasion which destabilizes Bluefarb’s refusal to acknowledge Bigger’s own refusal to be caged or killed for the majority of the novel:

After Bigger takes the plunge into violence, Chicago's South Side becomes for him a labyrinth—Wright's word—from which there is no egress. **Almost before he makes his first bid for freedom, he knows, more instinctively than rationally, that there is no true or lasting escape for him.** Like the rat in the book's first pages, Bigger is trapped—except that he is no rat but a human being caught in the grip of circumstances in a world he might have shared were life ordered in some other, more equitable way…. ‘He could not leave Chicago; all roads were blocked, and all trains, buses and autos were being stopped and searched He was trapped. He would have to get out of this building. But where would he go?’ Trapped. There is an irony here, since even the more familiar and innocuous amusement park labyrinth (or maze) has a way out, as well as a way in, assuming that one does not panic and disorient himself in the process of finding it. In Bigger’s instance, the "escape" itself finally ends by becoming Bigger’s greatest trap.

\(^{34}\) Ibid, 136.
Indeed—and it is doubtful how consciously aware Bigger is of this—if he would escape from the labyrinth of the city and society, he must first escape from the labyrinth of his own mind (emphasis my own).\textsuperscript{35}

Bluefarb’s repeated emphasis on Bigger’s lack of rationality/overreliance on instinct works to redouble the protagonist’s animalization in a way that leaves him, rather fittingly, no way out. Not only is Bigger hemmed in on all sides, he also, following this line of argument, lacks the reasoning capacity needed to fight back in any way that might make a dent. Both Bigger and the rat are hollow vessels in this sense, pure rage and hunger along a given vector. Such a misreading of Bigger’s robust interior life, the contours of which the reader is made privy to at various points in the novel via the voice of an omniscient narrator, is baffling.

Though the acts of violence Bigger commits throughout the novel certainly beg a number of questions about his empathy or willingness to exercise mercy in a given scenario, that Bigger remains a singularly thoughtful character throughout the text is difficult to deny. From his initial scheme to hide and eventually dispose of Mary Dalton’s body, to the later decisions that help him evade capture by police for the majority of the novel—to say nothing of his daily ruminations on his own place within the social field—the insight Wright’s narrator provides into Bigger’s everyday thoughts are more than enough to challenge a reading of Bigger as an irrational creature. To obscure his intellectual labor in the service of a version of Bigger that marks all of his escape acts as futile products of instinct, and his very being as rooted in separation from the social world, does an injustice to a character that is plotting his next escape at every turn, if not through a new job or running from the police then through dreams of another kind of

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid, 136.
flight altogether.\(^{36}\) Such a reading also elides the rat’s rich history in the U.S. cultural imaginary as infinitely more than just a figure under duress, more than that which is always already condemned to a life of unending want. As Jonathan Burt’s book-length ode to the animal in question, the aptly titled *Rat*, elucidates, the rat has historically been not only a site of lack, but of seemingly infinite transgressive potential:

> Because the rat is an object of defilement and because notions of defilement and dirt are very much bound up with key symbolic boundaries of clean and unclean crucial to a general sense of order, then the rat logically should take its place on the far side of a border separating it from clean or the good. But, the symbolic order as much as the physical order is frail and can be easily threatened, especially around dangerous ideas that are so often associated with the horror of the rat: unbounded sexual reproduction, a limitless appetite, and dirt. Cultural attitudes to the rat reveal that it is a pollutant with the ability to move between bodily and symbolic boundaries with an overall trajectory that seems to make it an especially threatening phenomenon as much in the realm of language and thought as in the granary or the food store. Like other dangerous objects, the rat constantly pushes at the edges of the borders set to contain it. Just to make matters worse, it also embodies a certain ambivalence. The rat is difficult to encode as a straightforwardly loathsome object partly because a refrain common in much writing on rats is that these creatures also inspire a sneaking, if sometimes sullen, admiration. The lascivious, greedy and cannibalistic rat, a stalwart harbourer of a good swatch of the Seven Deadly Sins, is also extremely smart, adaptable and even, for some writers, beautiful. And despite the rat’s residence in ditches or sewers, it manages to stay remarkably clean and ‘preserves itself from pollution.’\(^{37}\)

The rat, according to Burt, is a figure full of contradiction, a fleet-footed signifier unwilling to stay still long enough to be held down or hemmed in holed up by the limits of human expectation. As presented here, the rat is an ideal example of the ways in which actual, living animals explode the reductive significations that are so frequently mapped onto their bodies, and in the process force the critic to re-calibrate classic approaches to thinking something like rat-ness in a contemporary context. The opening scene of *Native

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Son is perhaps a fitting place to begin such theorization. Taking up Burt’s rigorous, graceful account avails a reading of Bigger-as-rat that is not easily conflated with a reading of the rat as solely a marker of death or bare life. Burt’s gesture toward the rat’s numerous other symbolic functions primarily focuses instead on human misconception, on a widespread social fear of the rat predicated upon unwarranted worries about its reproductive capacity and biological predisposition toward filth. Burt effectively argues that this is an archetype of the rat that is particularly difficult to shake, that of a creature which haunts every crevice and crack of the modern city, lying in wait to strike or strain the lack of resources in a given space. Yet such stereotypes also bleed into more interesting ways of thinking about the rat’s movement not as an instinctual fleeing or penchant for theft, but, to use Burt’s terms, as a kind of adaptability. Put differently, in the animal kingdom, there are few escape artists on par with our rodent friends, and fewer still that inspire such a wide array of responses from the dominant species.

The relationship between such effects/affects and a certain vision of blackness is much more complicated than what we see from Smethurst and Bluefarb. Instead of an affective economy in which blackness is solely a site of lack or nothingness, what we end up with instead is a vision of blackness—which is not only the blackness of the rat or the blackness of Bigger but the blackness of the characters that populate the book and give it its full, unforgettable force—that, through the figure of the rat, is also linked to a persistence that is restorative. Bigger takes flight not out of what certain critics would have us think of as base instinct, but for the love of freedom and the refutation of a social world in which he was trapped from the very beginning, marked since the day he was

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born. Bigger’s adaptability fuels such flight, and makes his prolonged evasion of arrest possible:

He saw one of the men rise and flash a light. The circling beams lit the roof to a daylight brightness and he could see that one man held a gun. He would have to cross to other roofs before this man or others came upon him. They were suspicious and would comb every inch of space on top of these houses. On all fours, he scrambled to the next ledge and then turned and looked back; the man was still standing, throwing the spot of yellow about over the snow. Bigger grabbed the icy ledge, hoisted himself flat upon it, and slid over. He did not think now of how much strength was receded to climb and run; the fear of capture made him forget even the cold, forget even that he had no strength left. From somewhere in him, out of the depths of flesh and blood and bone, he called up the energy to run and dodge with but one impulse: he had to elude these men. He was crawling to the other ledge, over the snow, on his hands and knees, when he heard the men yell, “There he is!” The three words made him stop; he had been listening for them all night and when they came he seemed to feel the sky crashing soundlessly about him. What was the use of running? Would it not be better to stop, stand up, and lift his hands high above his head in surrender? Hell, naw! He continued to crawl.39

One imagines that it is such kinesthetic brilliance and aptness at working under pressure that allows for Bigger to survive the period before the book begins, the narrative we are not granted access to which constitutes a kind of blankness before the chaos. Bigger’s “hell, naw” reads as a mantra here, the demurral of white civil society’s control bodied forth in a moment of literal conflict with the state apparatus. In a moment where surrender would be the logical choice for many, Bigger opts into a different set of protocols altogether, choosing instead to seek egress though the world may be crashing all around him. This climactic scene of the book’s second movement, “Flight,”—part of a broader triptych which composes the text in its entirety: “Fear”, “Flight”, and “Fate”—is one that characterizes this section of the text as a whole, and also gives new life to the rat scene which opens “Fear,” offering fresh insight into what the slippage of Bigger Thomas and the black rat from the kitchenette might produce. Bigger’s ability to process quickly in the midst of such sensory overload (the falling snow, the policemen shouting,

the yellow lights dancing against the roof) reflects an adaptability that we see modeled elsewhere in the text, though not in such dramatic fashion. Here, we have Bigger “on all fours” crawling across the roof, fleeing from the force of the law, spinning the moment’s fear into improvisatory genius.

Bigger is the rat in its most robust form here, its adeptness at escape and survival bodied forth in each dexterous maneuver, his hands against the ledge against the air. This is what so many readings of the opening scene (and thus also the later instances of pestiferous tenacity throughout the text) miss. It is both a profound misunderstanding of the blackness as a site of unfettered possibility, as well as the nature of the history and biology of rats as a species, that leads one to a deficit interpretation of our first encounter with Bigger and the kitchenette that gave birth to his ongoing refusal to be confined. Both Bigger and the rat are “dangerous objects,” forms of insurgent life that refuse the limitations imposed from outside. To read his metaphorical rat-ness, which is irreducible to but nonetheless tied up with the rat’s literal and figurative blackness—read: blackness as a site of lack or availability to death—is to ignore a body of zoological and historical data that unmakes such thinking, exposes it as unfounded myth in service of a history that never happened:

In the wild, or on the margins of human life, the rat is commonly loathed, the object of vermin control. Either way, one could say that it loses. But the rat fights back. It is not easily containable and its autonomy extends beyond the physical world of the necessities of food and shelter to playing a central, sometimes disturbing, role in human culture. We have a place for it in the classification of the animal kingdom, but its significance goes beyond its ranking and is out of all proportion to its size. The rat is, as some writers have phrased it, a twin of the human, and their mutual history is dark. In fact, the rat has been represented as the very debasement of evolution. If one devolves ‘downwards’ from the human, one comes not to the ape or monkey but to the rat…In 1923 H. P. Lovecraft wrote a horror story entitled ‘The Rats in the Walls’. In Lovecraft’s comments on it he dwells on the topics of nature and evolution, and discusses the thesis that there were two separate lines of racial development, in his terminology Caucasian and Negro. These derived from different types of ape but at root they shared a common ancestry of extreme bestiality. ‘Certain traits in many lower animals suggest, to my mind whose imagination
is not dulled by scientific literalism, the beginnings of activities horrible to contemplate in evolved mankind.’ ‘The Rats in the Walls’ is a story, among other things, of such a descent through layers of cultural and natural evolution to the most primeval, base, and horrific level of human activity. What we reach at the bottom of this descent, however, is not the basest of human simian ancestry, but the rat. 40

What emerges from this dark history, marked and marred by debasement? What grows from the midst of this shared relegation to theory’s underground, far from the inimitable glow of reason? Such subterranean living produces something other than bareness, more like an unbounded plenitude set free from the gaze of those that dwell above ground. In the rooftop scene from “Flight,” we encounter Bigger as a character of singular improvisatory talent, one straining against a system predicated upon the notion that he, the humanoid pest in flight, creeps and crawls at the nadir of the social ladder, leeching resources from those above.

From the very beginning, we see Bigger fleeing, always fleeing, because that is the central argument of the primal scene. Not that Bigger and his family are beyond repair, or at all broken, but that survival is flight by another name. Bigger is not fleeing from the police alone, but, as is the case in Burt’s extensive study of the rat, an entire system of thought that would brand him as the unmaking of the human project, a dark mark on the very subjectivity he should, ostensibly, seek to attain. Bigger too lives on the margins of what many critics imagine as a full, human life, and as such has been taken up in the popular imagination as that rare protagonist that doubles as an ultimate other, an archetypal criminal mind onto which we might project our greatest fears and anxieties. Yet neither Wright nor Burt permits such a straightforward take on their subjects of interest. “Flight” instead becomes the tale of an unkillable outlaw on the run; a central

figure that dodges death at each corner while headed nowhere in particular. This striving
toward nowhere is also the expression of the desire for an elsewhere, a place far away
from the extended reach of the law. This desire is bodied forth emphatically in the “hell
naw” of the aforementioned passage, in the crawling and leaping and running that stand
in composite as the choreography of his ongoing escape, his refusal of the “there he is” uttered by the policemen on his tail.

It is Bigger’s transgression of the law that blackens him beyond what can be
allowed to let live or linger, the violence he enacts against Mary Dalton that renders him
the object of vermin control. Bigger’s understanding of this shift in his position is his
central motivation for fleeing from home, an escape which operates in most profound
contradistinction to widely accepted readings of the text as one that is marked primarily
by a certain orientation toward death, and the ever-looming threat of its swift approach.
Even outside of critics like Smethurst of Bluefarb, contemporary theorists too, including
those who at times appear willing to extend a certain generosity toward Native Son,
ascribe a lack of possibility to its opening scene that forecloses the reading practice that
serves as the core of this study. Put differently, such texts offer readings that do not
necessarily account for the fugitivity that is immanent to these figures, even when they
are under extreme duress.

There is a persistence that these writers cannot deny, even as they obscure it
within an entangling pathology that leaves little room for beauty or breath. The difficulty
of moving away from such a reading is exemplified in Abdul R. JanMohamed’s brilliant
study, The Death Bound Subject: Richard Wright’s Archaeology of Death in which the
author deftly moves, within the space of mere pages, between a reading of the rat scene

\[\text{41 Ibid, 265.}\]
that traffics in much of the thanatocentric language that characterizes aforementioned earlier critics of Wright, to what reads as a much more capacious interpretation of Bigger’s relationship to the figure of the animal, and what such a relation means for how we are to read the role of the pest in the text’s opening scenes:

The rich symbolism and ambiguity of the famous rat scene that opens the novel allow it to be interpreted in diverse ways. However, from the perspective of the dialectic of death that preoccupies Wright, the scene’s primary function is to map the zone of bare life as one fundamental border that defines Bigger’s subjectivity….here Wright emphasizes the disruption, by the rat, of the precarious, ritualized civility on which is predicated the humanity of the four people in the room. The four people (Bigger’s two siblings and his mother) living in this one-room kitchenette in absolute poverty and lack of any privacy manage to maintain their human dignity via a ritual in which the boys dress first while the women turn their backs, and vice versa. By provoking panic and chaos, the rat’s entrance disrupts the minimal human dignity afforded by this form of civility and threatens to banish entirely the routine ceremony that establishes their humanity. Bigger’s subsequent crushing of the rat, its “actual-death,” permits the humans to return to the ritual that defines their minimal humanity. Throughout the novel, Bigger repeatedly uses the term blotting out to characterize his desire to kill various human beings who are perceived as penetrating into his “bare life,” the zone within which his social death permits him to “live.”

JanMohamed’s emphasis on the precarious, unwieldy nature of Bigger’s everyday life—even to the point that places the word “live” in quotation marks at the very end of this particular passage—marks his reading of the novel’s opening as one that necessarily decents the potential, if not for resistance, then at least for the presence and persistence of everyday living, an ordinariness that is undoubtedly something other than social death or bare life, but might be better described as a third space between utter despair and the various markers of wealth or wellness that would legibly distance Bigger’s family from the kind of abjection that so many interlocutors of Wright have read into the text. Yet just as quickly as JanMohamed presents the reader with what seems like more of the same—

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43 I borrow this term from Homi Bhaba. For more on third space, see Homi K. Bhaba. The location of culture. London: Routledge, 1994.
though it is worth mentioning that his work’s invocation of Patterson provides a theoretical framework for thinking Bigger’s life as death that is arguably more compelling than much of what precedes it—he pivots the reader away from a deficit reading and into a (re)vision of animality that leaves space for alternate, otherworldly possibility. JanMohamed writes:

“Bigger’s future is symbolized by the rat, which, in the face of its condemnation to death, resists the inevitable with tenacity and defiance. By constructing these…horizons or borders of death, Wright prefigures Bigger’s ‘fate’…his fate being death, it is the recognition (and the embracing) of death that eventually becomes the precondition of his freedom.”

When imagined as a figure of defiance, as the embodiment of insurgent life over and against the systemic deployment of death which rarely relents and is ever-shifting in its protocols and forms, the rat avails itself to the contemporary reader as a sorely needed trap door, a way outside of the book’s well-received logic of ubiquitous decay and sorrow that offers an array of interpretative choices. Wright’s rat is familiar with the imminence of death, how large it looms. Nonetheless, in this interpretation of events, that the rat is eventually going to die is altogether beside the point. JanMohamed’s gesture towards the rat’s pluck, its foolish refusal, creates fertile ground for a consideration of what strains in and through and against the social death he names and so meticulously outlines, of how black folks survive even when they are outcast and outgunned and outlawed and outstripped, how they nonetheless go about living.

Ultimately, the bridge Wright builds, and JanMohamed shores up, between Bigger’s daily struggle and the world of the rat is not a gesture of dehumanization, but rather a provision of insight into the universal particularity of such blackness, an

outsiderness which flourishes in the shadow of white civil society and its (anti)social field. Both Bigger and the rat are able to live outside of the “epistemology of ignorance” which Charles Mills describes as an undercurrent of daily social life for white signatories of The Racial Contract, a mode of being in the world that runs counter to the sloppy, unfettered attempt at escaping the inevitable embodied in their respective scenes of fighting and fleeing. These figures represent a disruptive social force that knows no outside order and needs none in order to function. In lieu of “the good life,” both Wright’s rat and his protagonist choose worlds that exist only inside the walls and under the floorboards, the myriad lives made possible by the cover of darkness and dirt.

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The 4,000 or so haiku that Richard Wright penned toward the end of his life articulate an account of his relationship to the figure of the pest, and animal life broadly construed, that is altogether different from what appears in much of his other work. The 817 spare, difficult poems that constitute his final book, Haiku: This Other World, poems which, according to Wright’s daughter, Julia, who penned the text’s introduction, were in some ways the textual embodiment of Wright’s own health troubles toward the end of his life. To her mind, the haiku served as “self-developed antidotes against illness.” Such an understanding of Wright’s process, as well as the material conditions in which he


46 Ibid, 97.

48 Leza Lowitz. "Haiku: This Other World (review)." Manoa 13, no. 2 (2001): 204.

produced his final work—that is, that he wrote all of these poems while ailing from amoebic dysentery and living in Parisian exile—is productive for a contemporary return to what this work might mean when considered as part of a larger tradition of black writers articulating their relationship to ever-looming threat of death—physical, psychic, social, civic or otherwise—through the figure of the animal.

Although there are certainly any number of animal figures that populate Wright’s haiku (dogs, crows, cats and cows are repeat offenders) I want to concentrate here on what rats are up to in Wright’s poetry. Wright’s haiku have received a fair amount of critical attention over the past ten years, but there has been little extensive focus on the specific doings of the animal figures in these poems, as most scholarship on this work has tended in the direction of reading his haiku as a form of nature writing in a broad sense, without much focus on the animals themselves, or what such a relationship between a black writer and animal life might mean as part of a larger trend in post-Emancipation era black literatures.  

Thus, my primary interest here is to hone in on several of Wright’s haiku in particular, “#74,” “#21,” “#114” and #795, as a means through which to finally set foot upon heretofore-untraveled roads that Wright maps out for us by refusing to temper the preoccupation with rats that can be found all throughout his corpus. We have already seen from Wright’s placement of Bigger Thomas via-a-vis the figure of the rat that Wright is familiar with the rat’s potential as a symbol of escape. Here, we are granted access to a separate component of the rat’s affective arsenal: it’s capacity to hide, to

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haunt. If we can agree with Wright’s assessment of the work, his claim that “these poems are the result of my being in bed a great deal and it is likely that they are bad,” then I wonder what sort of beauty might bloom from this badness or lack of vigor, what approach to rendering the rat spills forth from so much time spent lying still, dreaming of the other locales that the rat’s size and swiftness make available, if only through the reach metaphor provides.

“#21” is a notable example of Wright’s deployment of rats as figures of haunting, in part because no rat actually appears within the body of the poem itself:

On winter mornings
The candle shows faint markings
Of the teeth of rats.

Here, the rat’s presence, or perhaps even the presence of many rats, a legion of rats untold and unthought, is signaled by the very absence of any body whatsoever, by the trace the rat bodies leave behind. That these etchings are left in candle wax, an instrument that might be used to ward off pests with its heat and light, is a testament to the resolve of these particular rats, their commitment to being seen. There is also a gesture here toward the insatiable hunger of pest animals in the city; these rats were trying to eat a candle whole if not snuff out its glow. Put differently, the rats in “#21” leave a calling card but never show their faces. They thieve in the night, and clear out before day breaks their cover. The markings they leave function in part as a reflection of the condition and quality of the speaker’s home; one assumes that a wealth of candles might imply the absence of electricity, or heat. Early on, then, we have a sense of the class struggle that is


52 Ibid,6.
built into these poems. These are not the haiku of a speaker enmeshed in nature, free from the trappings of domestic life. These are poems directly engaged with the forms of animal life that the poor are forced to grapple with every day, the natural objects that refuse to remain in nature, and dare to dwell where they are not wanted.

“#74” clues us in to yet another instance in which rats are deployed as such hidden, liminal figures in Wright’s haiku. Unlike their kin in “#21,” the rats in question here leave no physical evidence whatsoever of their nightly activities, only the phonic matter of their movement:

The sound of a rat
Scampering over cold tin
Is heard in the bowels.  

The open-endedness of the poem’s last line generates an impasse here. By stanza’s end, the reader cannot be sure of where the rat is. If the “bowels” Wright refers to here are indeed the bowels of the speaker’s home at the moment of writing, the apartment which appears in so many of the haiku in This Other World, then what are we to make of the doubleness of the term, the hunger it gestures towards, the way it serves to anthropomorphize the apartment. With an approach that differs greatly from the one deployed in “#21,” Wright produces a sense of trepidation in the reader not through the visually perceptible clue, not droppings on the window sill or teeth marks on the candles or holes in a loaf of bread, but the very sound of rats moving. The scampering rats of “#74” move are fully present. They are with us in the moment of reading. They are close enough to hear their footsteps but far enough that the speaker can register a great distance between their body and his body, between the underground of the apartment’s inner

53 Ibid, 19.
walls, its bowels, and its primary stage, the desk from which he writes. Notice too the
distance of the passive voice, “the sound of a rat…is heard” which rings differently than I
hear the sound of rats. The consequences of such a choice are not lost on Wright. While
assigning the hearing of the rats’ footsteps to a single figure might have given life to a
reading of this poem as a reflection upon a frightening, individual experience, what
Wright’s use of the passive voice allows for is an image of the apartment as overrun with
the sound of claws, of countless rats scraping against the cold tin of what holds the very
structure of the speaker’s home in place. The sound of rats is heard by anyone in earshot
of their collective movement, anyone forced to be still and suffer their distant music. A
similar theme permeates one of Wright’s later haiku, “#114,” which shares an opening
line with “#74,” though it pivots in a slightly different direction one line later:

The sound of a rat
Gnawing in the winter wall
Of a rented room.  

The direct action of “#114” moves in stark contrast to that of the aforementioned haiku in
which rats are central actors. Whereas “#21” offers little more than teeth markings to
indicate the rat’s presence, and “#74” eschews such visual evidence altogether, opting
instead to linger in the fear generated by the sounds of countless tiny feet moving through
the depths of the speaker’s home, the rat which serves as the subject of “#114” gets right
to the business of consumption. Whether the animal is gnawing on food from within the
walls of the apartment or gnawing on the walls themselves is altogether unclear; what is
undeniable is the voracious hunger of the rat that is made palpable in the second and third
lines. Wright’s choice of “gnawing” lending a sense of temporality to the description of

54 Ibid, 29.
the scene, setting up what feels like the inevitable breakthrough of this rat and untold others beyond the border of the walls and into the room itself, a break which would eradicate any and all boundaries between speaker and object, between the proper occupant of the room and the interloper we know only by the noise of its desire. The rented room we are introduced to here has a similar feel to the setting of both “#21” and “#74,” these are spaces we know only by what is not supposed to be there, by the surplus noise and jagged etchings left behind by vermin that eat and move and destroy with relative impunity. A far cry from any form of haiku that might “express the poet’s union with nature,” what we find in these haiku from Wright are strong gestures towards the various kinds of conflict and fissure that emerge from sharing space with unexpected visitors that have no intention of leaving. These are poems motivated by a generative disunity; an extended acknowledgement of the peculiar ecology of affects that pest animals produce. There is no indication that Wright is especially fond of these rats, or even that he carries a certain ambivalence regarding whether they remain or not. The predominant emotion undergirding these poems is a sense of detached awe, a willingness to engage with the singular power that rats hold in such a cramped space. Wright paints a robust picture of what it might mean to participate in an ecosystem in which human dominance is completely destabilized by spatial restriction. There is little uncertainty as to which party feels most at ease in these poems; Wright is not the master of this domain. Such control belongs primarily to the rats that populate these poems and serve as their principal object of interest:

However much we may seek to extrapolate the rat from its unnatural surroundings and view it as a "natural" creature with which the speaker in the haiku is somehow attuned,

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we cannot escape the image of the savage rat, trapped, wheeling, and attacking Bigger. Even if such an intertextual elision were possible, the two haiku contain a sense of menace: the first results from the disconcerting noise of claws on tin, and the second from the rat attempting to chew its way through the wall and into the speaker's apartment. The point of view of the haiku is also interesting. Rather than using a subjective "I" to personalize the experiences, Wright suggests that they are universal; anyone who is impoverished could have the same experience.56

This passage, taken from Richard Iadonisi’s “‘I Am Nobody’: The Haiku Of Richard Wright,” is compelling largely because of its focus on the agency of the animal figures at play. Iadonisi’s claim that there is a “sense of menace”57 to the rat’s movements, as opposed to raw hunger or the desire for safety, indexes the sort of unbound possibility when it comes to animal behavior that Wright makes space for in these haiku and beyond. It is Wright’s ongoing commitment to such capacity that leads to my primary point of contention with Iadonisi’s reading of what constitutes the intersection between the rat that attacks Bigger in the beginning of Native Son and the rats in Wright’s haiku. Where Iadonisi sees “menace” and “savage” animals bent on inflicting harm, I imagine that Wright left room for us to see creatures committed to their own survival, ones whose everyday comings and goings are sources of fear only for those that live outside of their sensory world. Though both the scampering feet in “#74” and the “gnawing” teeth in “#114” can be envisioned as attempts to undermine or unmake the lived environment of the speaker, they could just as easily register as banal activity, misrecognized and aligned by an unwitting observer, a speaker that knows well enough to fear the pest, but understands little to nothing about its interior life. It is only in the last of the haiku in The Other World, “#795” that we get a glimpse into such interiority, albeit in a way that fits

57 Ibid, 191.
cleanly into the accusations of anthropomorphism Wright’s haiku have faced since their publication:58

A tolling church bell:
   A rat rears in the moonlight
   And stares at the steeple.59

One of the final haiku in the collection, “#795” serves as a compelling counter not only to Iadonisi’s menacing, “savage” rats, but also any number of other depictions of rats that are prevalent throughout The Other World. In stark contrast to the rat that is forced to hide or haunt, one that can only leave its trace but never move freely in the open without the fear of death, we have here a rat that takes the time to contemplate, one who, rather fittingly given what we know about the author, stands alone that it might think and do so uninterrupted. This final rat is illegible as a pest animal in any meaningful sense. We do not know whether it lives outside or inside of the apartment, whether it has stolen any food or takes up residence in the walls at night. All we are given is a set of physical gestures; its rearing and staring that are perhaps rooted in, but nonetheless exist in excess of, instinct or reflex. This is more than an animal reacting to the sound of potential danger. What Wright creates in this scene is a respite from the unrelenting danger of the domestic sphere, an open space in which the rat might dwell, or imagine the world as if it were otherwise.


If You Surrender To The Air: Morrison, birds and the black masculine

The survey says all groups can make more money if they lose weight except black men...men of other colors and women of all colors have more gold, but black men are the summary of weight, a lead thick thing on the scales, meters spinning until they ring off the end of the numbering of accumulation, how things grow heavy, fish on the ends of lines that become whales, then prehistoric sea life beyond all memories, the billion days of human hands working, doing all the labor one can imagine...

—Afaa Michael Weaver, "American Income"

The very essence of the male animal, from the bantam rooster to the four-star general, is to strut. Indeed, in 19th century America, a particular type of exaggerated male boastfulness became almost a national style. Not for the Negro male.

—Daniel Patrick Moynihan, The Moynihan Report

Hold fast to dreams
For if dreams die
Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly.

—Langston Hughes, “Dreams”

How might we configure the limits and lacunae of the black masculine as a mode or means of thinking gender? What does it call into being or put under erasure the moment it arrives on the scene? What texts, both in and outside the realm of literary criticism, are available to the contemporary reader interested in parsing out the ways in which black boys and men move through text at the level of representation and symbol, which is also to say, what lessons do we glean from the U.S. American literary canon about what black men are, how they live, or whether their living is always already a spectacular kind of dying? Further, if one were to respond to such a claim or question of black male social life as a form of death in the negative, how might we theorize and historicize the ways in which death has come to serve as the dominant frame for thinking
black male experience in the U.S. and abroad? For the purposes of this essay, I am interested in working through and against discourses that imagine little else for black men beyond the grave, and furthermore in gathering such materials to think toward a theory of the black masculine that shatters prevailing, pathological assumptions about what such lives can bear or bear forth, and ultimately aims to build something fresh from the shards.

Toni Morrison’s oeuvre is a singular resource for such an endeavor. There is already an extensive body of work on the ways in which her characters open up new worlds for thinking identity across lines of perceptible difference, alternate realities that avail to us more transgressive models for race, gender, and disability in particular. Though much has been written about Morrison’s work in this vein, few scholars have explored the role of nonhuman actors, and nonhuman animals in particular, in Morrison’s ongoing argument against strict, bounded markers of identity that leave no room for growth or play. Such characters abound in Morrison’s fiction—Here Boy, Sethe and Denver’s dog in Beloved, the horses ridden by the tribe of blind warriors in Tar Baby, and the flock of birds that follows the titular character of Sula all come to mind—but rarely do such animal characters take center stage as a means through which a given character becomes an object of analysis. In one of Morrison’s novels in particular, Song of Solomon, I will argue, Morrison’s emphasis on the presence, and most importantly the

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properties of animals, is notably gendered, and provides a fertile ground for imagining a theory of the black masculine grounded in literary analysis.

Put somewhat differently, I am interested in the ways in which Toni Morrison uses animals, and birds in particular, to make a certain argument about how it feels to be a black man, how she deploys them in order to critique not only the limiting, violent ways in which patriarchal black masculinity is structured, but to describe the means through which black men and boys bear such weight, how they comport themselves under the duress of everyday life as a perceived threat. Following Afaa Weaver’s suggestion that “black men are the summary of weight,” 62 I would like to track the way that black masculinity as heaviness, as excess, as adornment, as vanity, as *exorbitance* moves through *Song of Solomon* in the bodies of birds, how these animals, rather paradoxically, come to signal a certain boundedness to earth, an unwieldy abundance that limits all possibility of escape or futurity. Alongside Nahum Chandler and others however, I would like to think imaginatively about what such *exorbitance*63 avails to us as a frame for imagining alternative black masculinities, and begin with the premise of abundance rather than absence. Using some of Morrison’s most well known characters, Milkman Dead, his best friend Guitar, and his father, Macon Dead II as central examples, I will close read moments of interspecies interaction with birds in the text in an effort to elucidate the generous approach to thinking black masculinity, and black ontology in a broader sense, that Morrison’s work provides.

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By theorizing a Morrisonian vision of black masculinity as always already bound up with a certain heaviness, a haunting presence which doubles as a kind of beauty but also prevents something like flight or a legible form of social mobility, I intend both to contribute to an ongoing conversation around representations of black maleness as well as trouble some of the arguments that have historically given coherence to that field. Following Morrison’s lead, my aim is to make an argument for a set of unfamiliar, destabilizing constellation of masculinities, ones that transcend and unmoor reductive ways of thinking the intersection of blackness and gender. Central to this argument will be an extended consideration of the social milieu into which Milkman Dead is thrown, a world that marks and mars him from birth as the carrier of numerous traits that differentiate him from other black men in the text. I am interested in exploring this distance, this discomfort, at the level of feeling, in examining what Milkman’s experiences throughout Song of Solomon elucidate about the way real-world masculinities come to be formed, and how they might be critically desedimented in the service of a fugitivity which might ease the weight of living while both black and boy, both black and man but unbowed, unfettered, undead.

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The opening scene of Song of Solomon betrays the novel’s obsession with failed flights, its persistent concern with what happens when a body misapprehends its own, unbearable heaviness. The first example of such failure in the text is deeply ironic, even to the point of tragedy, largely because of its object, a salesman by the name of Robert Smith:

The North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance agent promised to fly from Mercy to the other side of Lake Superior at three o’clock. Two days before the event was to take place he tacked a note on the door of his little yellow house:
At 3:00 p.m. on Wednesday the 18th of February, 1931, I will take off from Mercy and fly away on my own wings. Please forgive me. I loved you all.

(signed) Robert Smith,
Ins. agent

Mr. Smith didn’t draw as big a crowd as Lindbergh had four years earlier—not more than forty or fifty people showed up—because it was already eleven o’clock in the morning, on the very Wednesday he had chosen for his flight, before anybody read the note. At that time of day, during the middle of the week, word-of-mouth news just lumbered along.  

My primary interest in this scene lies in what is underemphasized or altogether unsaid.

First, there is the matter of Robert Smith’s profession. That Smith, a man well-versed in the manifold dangers of everyday life by virtue of his work as a life insurance agent—and also, it is worth mentioning, has a small, yellow house that registers metonymically as a reflection of his own persistent caution or fear—would choose to engage in a public act of such exceptional risk is bizarre. This is not to say that one need work in life insurance to comprehend the dangers of jumping off of a building, but the extremity of contrast is generative here, as it conveys, rather vividly, the depth of Smith’s conviction. The note he leaves strengthens such a reading; its ambiguous ending initially reads, perhaps, as a suicide note, but also as a goodbye letter, and is a reflection of the depth of thought that serves as prelude to his grand escape.

This, of course, is the second form of jarring contrast we see at work in this primal scene: the clash between the morose, deeply personal nature of Smith’s note on the one hand, and the bombastic, rather colorful character of the act itself on the other, an act that is publicized, ostensibly, for the sake of attendance, and features unexpected flourishes, the most stark of which are the “blue silk wings” he dons in order to facilitate takeoff. If Smith is going to fly, he will do so in style. Note also the contrast

65 Ibid, 3.
Morrison draws between Smith’s declaration of his plans to fly and the slow, lumbering manner in which the news of his experiment travels. Dreams, the argument follows, take on a kind of weight when they are put into the world. To dream aloud is to invite critique, or worse perhaps, indifference. From the first scene, Morrison places this nexus before us: the conflict between a man’s desire to fly, *his desire to be seen doing so*, and a social world which can opt in or out of bearing the burden of such spectacle. Smith’s willingness to attempt this dangerous feat, one complicated by his aforementioned career choices, is inextricable from a certain refusal of invisibility, his silken wings, as well as the note he plasters to the front of his home, operating as embodiments of his yearning for engagement, both objects working in different ways to ensure that his plan is successful both as a mode of egress and a means of entertainment. An aesthete, Smith wants even his leaving to be beautiful. Such flair or flash appears to be a rather recent development for Smith, and is largely out of step with how he is characterized not too long after the text’s opening scene:

They kidded him, abused him, told their children to tell him they were out or sick or gone to Pittsburgh. But they held on to those little yellow cards as though they meant something—laid them gently in the shoe box along with the rent receipts, marriage licenses, and expired factory identification badges. Mr. Smith smiled through it all, managing to keep his eyes focused almost the whole time on his customers’ feet. He wore a business suit for his work, but his house was no better than theirs. He never had a woman that any of them knew about and said nothing in church but an occasional “Amen.” He never beat anybody up and he wasn’t seen after dark, so they thought he was probably a nice man. But he was heavily associated with illness and death, neither of which was indistinguishable from the brown picture of the North Carolina Mutual Life Building in the back of their yellow cards. Jumping from the roof of Mercy was the most interesting thing he had done. None of them had suspected he had it in him. Just goes to show, they murmured to each other, you never really do know about people.66

What does it cost to be unknown, or unloved? For Smith, such semi-anonymity was experienced alongside persistent abuse from his customers and fellow townspeople, an ire

66 Ibid, 9.
that is in some ways understandable given the regularity with which he asked them for money (“more regular than the reaper,”\textsuperscript{67} according to one source). This constant levying of funds, combined with Smith’s relative quietude in other avenues of town social life—public romance, performances of exuberance in church, etc.—served to create a rift between Smith and the rest of the social world, a dehiscence that he sought to mend in this moment of audience engagement, this final request. Over and against a reading that might lead us to understand Smith’s attempt at flight as the long-awaited break of a repressed figure in search of release, Morrison’s robust characterization also leaves space for a vision of Robert Smith as a man dedicated to certain forms of order and restraint, one who did not break as much as he decided to break out, break free. It is not life as such that Smith wants to escape, but rather the kind and caliber of life that is possible in his small Michigan town that he wishes to be rid of. The townspeople are ultimately correct; one cannot “know about” another person in any totalizing sense. Following Morrison’s characterization of Smith as someone that never did anything more “interesting”\textsuperscript{68} than jump from the roof of Mercy hospital, that never had a public relationship of any sort, or bothered anyone beyond what was required by his job, a flock of critical questions rise to the fore: who or what convinced Smith that he could fly in the first place? And, once such a conviction had taken hold, what would this kind of a man feel the need to take flight from? At the textual level, no tenable answer to the first question appears. To the second query, however, his letter replies, albeit in muted tones. The love that Robert Smith describes here, the love that is largely missing from the descriptions of Smith given by the townspeople—that is, the he is either persistently annoying or bewilderingly

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid, 8.
\textsuperscript{68} Ibid, 9.
dull—and can thus be described as an unrequited love, a love that pushed Smith to beg forgiveness not only for his leaving, but for his dull, dogged affection. In this way, Morrison provides the reader with an entrée into the affective economy of the text, one that will feature a web of relations marked by unreciprocated affection, by burden without release.

Robert Smith’s desire to fly is in many ways singular as it pertains to the ensemble of black male characters in *Song of Solomon*; the exorbitance he strains against is not rooted in vanity, a desire for revenge, or commitment to the accrual of material possessions—to be sure, these vices are primary sources of frustration for almost every other male character in the novel—but rather his banality, the boredom and outright indifference he inspires in his neighbors and clients. In a sense, this popular perception of Smith as a forgettable figure seems almost preordained. Morrison is renown for her flair when it comes to naming characters. What are we to make of a figure so plainly plumed, one that walks with a common name in a textual universe full of color? Consider the following passage from later in the novel, long after Smith’s demise:

> He closed his eyes and thought of the black men in Shalimar, Roanoke, Petersburg, Newport News, Danville, in the Blood Bank, on Darling Street, in the pool halls, the barbershops. Their names. Names they got from yearnings, gestures, flaws, events, mistakes, weaknesses. Names that bore witness. Macon Dead, Sing Byrd, Crowell Byrd, Pilate, Reba, Hagar, Magdalene, First Corinthians, Milkman, Guitar, Railroad tommy, Hospital Tommy, Empire State (he just stood around and swayed), Small Boy, Sweet, Circe, Moon, Nero, Humpty, Dumpy, Blue Boy, Scandinavia, Quack-Quack, Jericho, Spoonbread, Ice Man, Dough Belly, Rocky River, Gray Eye, Cock-a-Doodle-Doo, Cool Breeze, Muddy Waters, Pinetop, Jelly Roll, Fats, Lead Belly, Bo Diddley, Cat-Iron, Peg-Leg, Son, Shortstuff, Smoky Babe, Funny Papa, Bukka, Pink, Bull Moose, B.B., T-Bone, Black Ace, Lemon, Washboard, Gatemouth, Cleanhead, Tampa Red, Juke Boy, Shine, Staggerlee, Jim The Devil, Fuck-Up and Dat Nigger.\(^{69}\)

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\(^{69}\) A relatively small sampling of Morrison’s novels bears this out: Chicken Little, Son, Yardman, Baby Suggs, Eva Peace, Paul D, Denver, Pecola Breedlove, are just a few of the names that illustrate this point.

What does the name Robert Smith bear witness to? What mistake or weakness, what flaw or yearning? If we are to read the above passage as a theory of naming for Morrison, a flexible logic by which she lives into her Adamic duty as an author, then it becomes difficult not to see Robert Smith’s very name as a gesture toward either blandness—that is, that Smith has never done anything that would make him worthy of a nickname—or a long-standing distance from the sorts of social spaces, and caring, playful relationships, that would serve as the condition of possibility for such naming, such proximity rendered in language. Both readings dovetail in a fashion that supports the earliest descriptions of Smith. This was a man of duty with little to distract him from it, not even the love he writes about in the note he leaves behind as a final farewell. Smith was loved without return, and in the process, disinvested in more than just the town and its capacity for a certain vision of social life, but also, it would appear, scientific law. He never frames his flight as anything other than just such an escape. All the reader is made privy to in the way of description is Smith’s claim that the wings he will use as instruments of egress are “all his own.” Like so much else in his life, his wings are shared with no one. The tragedy of such ownership, such solitude, resists description.

Robert Smith’s death looms large over the novel, and serves as the connecting thread through which one can trace the critical role of animal presence, and animal symbolism, in Song of Solomon. Like so many of the characters that appear in the novel once his death becomes mere memory, Smith’s very person was indelibly marked not only by his inability to fly, but by his steadfast desire to do so, even against conventional wisdom or scientific discourse. It is his yearning in the face of such facts, this exorbitant will over and against systemic boundaries that would ostensibly foreclose such dreams
long before one could engage in the sort of behavior for which the townspeople most vividly remember him, that is of central concern. How does such yearning take hold? How do this novel’s black men in particular, ones that live with constant reminders of their own limitations, physical, financial and otherwise, and indeed the truth that their everyday lives are impinged upon by socio-legal restraints that function as persistent, undeniable limits, make up in their minds that something other than this sort of groundedness, this exorbitant weight, is all they will ever know? It is in this sense, that is, as an event which opens a series of questions that about how the novel’s central, metonymic ensemble functions as a proxy for real-world experiences of anti-black violence, that Robert Smith’s failed flight becomes an instructional moment not only for the reader, but also for other characters in the text, none more so than Milkman Dead:

The next day a colored baby was born inside Mercy for the first time. Mr. Smith’s blue silk wings must have left their mark, because when the little boy discovered, at four, the same thing Mr. Smith had learned earlier, that only birds and airplanes could fly—he lost all interest in himself. To have to live without that single gift saddened him and left his imagination so bereft that he appeared dull even to the women who did not hate his mother. The ones who did, who accepted her invitations to tea and envied the doctor’s big dark house of twelve rooms and the green sedan, called him “peculiar.”  

This origin story—both that of Milkman Dead as the first black baby born inside Mercy (which, I think, Morrison intends as a kind of double entendre, a moment meant to index both a geographical space of particular historical import within the narrative but also as a frame for thinking the duration of Milkman’s life as an extension of mercy as principle, to have us consider the various forms of mercy Milkman is shown throughout the text and how such mercy informs the way he comports himself in the world), and that of Milkman’s ongoing disappointment in the weight of his own body, i.e., the unshakeable

\[^{71}\text{Ibid, 9.}\]
realization that he, not unlike Robert Smith, is built for pursuits other than flight— sets up the novel’s central conflict.

First, the opening presents us with the question of what Milkman is to make of his own heaviness, how he is to manage a body that does not move the way he wants it to, or is read in ways that run counter to his expectations and desires. Secondly, the reader is made privy here to the first time that Milkman must navigate the gaze of others, in particular the women he encounters that find him to be “peculiar,” a term that swings in terms of register between the negative and the affirmative throughout the text. Robert Smith, now dead as the name that sutures Milkman to his kin, is not especially helpful in either regard. He neither provides Milkman with the tools needed to navigate the fleshly reality of his body, nor the social world that unwieldy body is forced to enter. From the outset, the first encounter that Milkman has with a man who might serve as the embodiment of his own future, Robert Smith, is one marked by catastrophe, and public failure, that ultimately ends in tragedy. The event is one that leaves Milkman’s imagination “bereft,” robbing him of the joy that would naturally attend watching a man fly, as well as the possibility of such flight, such freedom, for his future self. Morrison’s characterization of the Smith crash as an event that captures not only the attention of the community, but also, in a slightly different register, captures any sense of potential or possibility, stealing it from Milkman before he is old enough to glean that sort of disappointment from personal experience, is critical. As presented, this is the first lesson Milkman ever learns about what it means to move through the world; the first time he projects his own experiences onto another, seeing himself where he is not. In this sense, Robert Smith’s death is not only a mirror for Milkman; it is also a kind of mirror stage:
It suffices to understand the mirror stage in this context as an identification, in the full sense analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image—an image that is seemingly predestined to have an effect at this phase, as witnessed by the use in analytic theory of antiquity’s term imago. The jubilant assumption of his specular image by the kind of being—still trapped in his motor impotence and nursling dependence—the little man is at the infants stage thus seems to me to manifest in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the I is precipitated in a primordial form prior to being objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal its function as a subject. This form would, moreover, have to be called the “ideal-I”—if we wanted to translate it into a familiar register—in the sense that it will also be the root-stock of secondary identifications, this latter term subsuming the libidinal normalization functions. But the important point is that this form situates the agency known as the ego, prior to its social determination, in a fictional direction that will forever remain irreducible for any single individual or, rather, that will only asymptotically approach the subject’s becoming, no matter how successful the dialectical syntheses by which he must resolve, as I, his discordance with his own reality.\footnote{Jacques Lacan and He Fink. "The Mirror Stage as Formative of The I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience." In \textit{Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English}. New York: W.W. Norton. 2006.}

This passage from Jacques Lacan’s “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function” avails to us a peculiar sort of second insight into the initial encounter between Robert Smith’s legacy, his “mark” as Morrison terms it, and Milkman Dead, a protocol for imagining, at the level of trauma and psychological development, what transpires when an infant’s birth is inextricably linked to a man crashing to his demise right in front of him. Though Lacan’s analysis is useful in terms of its metaphorical breadth, I would like to read against the grain of it here so as to honor the particularity of the mirroring that passes between Milkman and Robert Smith, as I think it contains elements of the Lacanian mirror stage, but ultimately drives the subject of the stage, the child glaring into the mirror, in a slightly divergent direction than Lacan’s theory, as presented here, can account for. Though there is undoubtedly a certain identification that takes place between Milkman and Robert Smith, I would argue that Milkman spends much of \textit{Song of...}
Solomon actively disinvesting in the illogical, seemingly spontaneous activity we see from Smith in the book’s earliest scenes.

Like his father Macon Dead II, Milkman is exceedingly practical. His emotions, like his wealth, are primarily invested in what can be held or owned. Milkman does not see an “ideal-I,” in Smith, but rather an anti-ideal-I, a portent, a warning of what happens when one seeks to elide or evade the law. The image of Smith’s beautiful, crashing body haunts Milkman; it stands in as a representative of all that he seeks to avoid, the risk of loving anything too much, even one’s own freedom, and the various kinds of leaping or leaving that might attend such love. Milkman’s unceasing practicality, which could also be read as willful avoidance, though certainly not a lack, of something like creativity or daring, is a result of this origin steeped in blood, this cracked mirror image staring back at him from when he first entered the world. Song of Solomon is full of this sort of troublesome mirroring, replete with figures that look to elders and see versions of themselves they desperately seek to avoid. Thus, the disappointment inherent to this version of the mirror stage lies not in the asymptotic approach of an ideal that never arrives, one that would latch onto and merge with a given body, but the disappointment of a reflection that is inescapable, a model that is marked by failure, the anti-ideal-I which is always already a haunting presence that is nonetheless enfleshed. It is, to use Lacan’s language, “a fictional direction that will forever remain irreducible for any single individual or, rather, that will only asymptotically approach the subject’s becoming”73 primarily in the sense that these images, these living reflections, are fixtures from which characters like Milkman are always on the run. The images approach asymptotically, without ever reaching the body of the onlooker, because that is as close as Milkman and

73 Ibid.
others will let these images get. Robert Smith is indeed a mirror; the kind that Milkman has no interest in confronting. Given the persistence of Milkman’s desire to fly, a desire that manifests in many palpable ways towards the conclusion of the novel, such rejection—that is, of Robert Smith as origin narrative, as the chaos from which Milkman’s world emerges—is a reasonable strategy, one that allows Milkman to conduct a relatively safe, bourgeois lifestyle without the threat of reckless dreaming. In Song of Solomon, the figure of the anti-ideal-I is, from the outset, inextricably linked to images that are not mere extensions of psyche, but living persons that Morrison’s characters must contend with. For Milkman, the image of Robert Smith failing to fly—which is also, it should be noted, a failure to keep a promise he made in the note pasted to the front of his home—is just such a point of contention, as well as fraught identification, throughout the novel.

The weight of Smith’s failure lingers, and ultimately manifests in ways that mark Milkman even beyond the supposed peculiarity that is often remarked upon during his childhood. Beyond what the narrator refers to as a certain dullness—which registers here not just as the absence or suppression of smartness, but also as a lack of color or vibrancy, a doubling that is especially important given the splendor of Robert Smith’s sartorial performance the day of his failed flight, and only gains more traction as the novel picks up speed, its color palette widening all the while—there remains the issue of Milkman’s wounded imagination, the ways in which the Smith crash serves as a quick, irrefutable education on the relationship between black men and the limits of law. As Milkman soon learns, the algorithm is relatively simple: bucking the law courts a quick
death, and ultimately makes one’s life ungrievable.\textsuperscript{74} It is this weight, perhaps, the weight that attends the realization that he is neither bird nor airplane that is eventually bodied forth as what the narrator describes, in the first instance, as a stylized gait:

By the time Milkman was fourteen he had noticed that one of his legs was shorter than the other. When he stood barefoot and straight as a pole, his left foot was about half an inch off the floor. So he never stood straight; he slouched or leaned or stood with a hip thrown out, and he never told anybody about it—ever…It wasn’t a limp—not at all—just the suggestion of one, but it looked like an affected walk, the strut of a very young man trying to appear more sophisticated than he was. It bothered him and he acquired movements and habits to disguise what to him was a burning defect. He sat with his left ankle on his right knee, never the other way around. And he danced each new dance with a curious stiff-legged step that the girls loved and the other boys eventually copied. The deformity was mostly in his mind. Mostly, but not completely, for he did have shooting pains in that leg after several hours on a basketball court. He favored it, believed it was polio, and felt secretly connected to the late President Roosevelt for that reason. Even when everybody was raving about Truman because he had set up a Committee on Civil Rights, Milkman secretly preferred FDR and felt very close to him. Closer, in fact, to him than to his own father, for Macon had no imperfection and age seemed to strengthen him. Milkman feared his father, respected him, but knew, because of the leg, that he could never emulate him. So he differed from him as much as he dared. Macon was clean-shaven; Milkman was desperate for a mustache. Macon wore bow ties; Milkman wore four-in-hands. Macon didn’t part his hair. Milkman had a part shaved into his. Macon hated tobacco; Milkman tried to put a cigarette in his mouth every fifteen minutes. Macon hoarded his money; Milkman gave his away. But he couldn’t help sharing with Macon his love of good shoes and fine thin socks. And he did try, as his father’s employee, to do the work the way Macon wanted it done.\textsuperscript{75}

The difference Morrison posits here between an interpretation of Milkman’s limp as a physical disability born of ailment or physical injury (e.g., the narrator’s invocation of polio and Milkman’s ongoing affection for President Roosevelt) and the limp as a product of Milkman’s fears or desires—that is, the limp as the embodied performance of his yearning for sophistication or undeniable cool—is of paramount importance. Such

\textsuperscript{74} For more on grievable life, see Judith Butler.\textit{Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?} London: Verso, 2009.

over-performance, such compensation in the face of deep hunger for intimate relation is an indelible component of Milkman’s persona throughout the text.

In the place of the vocalized expression of that sort of desire, what we see instead are the sorts of gestures that Morrison lists when she outlines the various ways that Milkman purposely diverges from his father so as to ease the pain of his distance. This is the conflict that an unapproachable, inimitable model such as Macon Dead II presents for Milkman. Up and through adulthood, all he can do is leap, and even that is done in vain; what remains in the interval between his initial mirror, his anti-ideal-I, Robert Smith, and the ideal-I he seeks to emulate, his father, Macon, is a space that never closes. Instead, that distance manifests as a weight Milkman bears in his body. As Morrison characterizes their relationship, the distance between Milkman and Macon is enacted through both the heaviness implicit in the latter’s everyday movement, but also his sartorial choices and methods of self-care. This is an altogether different heaviness indexed by the incongruous movement of Milkman’s legs, themselves a metonym and marker of difference between his own physique and Macon’s, who is described as having “an athlete’s stride,” the heaviness of their irreconcilability, the impossibility of Milkman ever measuring up. The singular weight of patriarchal lineage is one that Milkman, repeatedly, is unable to bear with any sort of ease or comfort. This is a theme that recurs throughout the novel. Even his nickname represents a departure from family tradition and is a source of great frustration for his father, who, though he never discovers its deeply troubling origin—that his mother breastfed the boy well into childhood—nonetheless regards the appellation with disgust, thinking it “dirty, intimate, and hot.”

77 Ibid, 15.
One of the more compelling moments of Morrison’s initial description of Milkman’s gait is the imagery of him dancing, her claim that Milkman’s affected walk was actually a source of pride and positive regard when he would attend parties or other public gatherings with his peers. This distinction is critical, not only for its resonance with a social model of disability in which disability is always already a social and environmental phenomenon, and thus not so much an inherent trait as a mode of being in the world determined by one’s direct surroundings, architecturally and otherwise, but also because of the backdrop against which it places Milkman’s yearning for the acknowledgement and care of his father (though this desire is never given voice at the level of dialogue). When contrasted against the reality of Milkman’s status as a figure of prominence in the local community, a young man that is adored and emulated by most of his peers, then there is a slight shift in how we might read the negative affects that predominate his relationship with his father.

By all accounts, Milkman never registers the love of his friends as love. Like the affective labor of so many of the women in his life—as he is rather abruptly reminded by his sister Lena later in the novel78—their desire for relation is unimportant, even invisible to him. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Morrison has remarked elsewhere upon her ongoing interest in this well-documented experience of invisibility, or at least, the description of

78 “Our girlhood was spent like a found nickel on you. When you slept, we were quiet; when you were hungry, we cooked; when you wanted to play, we entertained you; and when you got grown enough to the know the difference between a woman and a two-toned Ford, everything in this house stopped for you. You have yet to wash your own underwear, spread a bed, wipe the ring from your tub, or move a fleck of your dirt from one place to another. And to this day, you have never asked one of us if we were tired, or sad, or wanted a cup of coffee. You’ve never picked up anything heavier than your own feet, or solved a problem harder than fourth-grade arithmetic. Where do you get the right to decide our lives?...I’ll tell you where. From that hog’s gut to that hangs down b... Well, let me tell you something, baby brother: you will need more than that. I don’t know where you will get it or who will give it to you, but mark my words, you will need more than that.”

this unique sort or sense of non-belonging in white civil society as a kind of invisibility, on the part of black men. In a recent public conversation with Junot Diaz at the New York Public Library, Morrison went as far as to offer a bit of counter-Ellisonian critique towards this point, saying simply: “Invisible to whom? Not to me.” Yet and still we see the product of that feeling-invisible bodied forth in how Milkman behaves, the cavalier way that he treats those that are not his father, who, even when he is an object of anger, is always deemed worthy of engagement. Even when Milkman is in conflict with his father, he accounts for him, and it is this accounting, this singular focus that strikes me as a Lacanian drive toward an ideal self, an endeavor that is ultimately fruitless, and produces an ongoing psychic injury that is bodied forth in the way that Milkman, quite literally, moves through space. The effect of his initial disappointment in Robert Smith and the subsequent disappointment of his father’s coldness deeply wound Milkman, as the failings of both men come to register as imposed, immutable limits on his own range of possible lives. That Milkman’s feelings, indeed his very capacity for feeling, manifests in such a profound, and in this case readily visible way, is part of a long-standing thought pattern in Morrison’s work. Song of Solomon in particular is replete with characters that appear, almost, to feel too much in a given moment, and indeed feel various emotions with such depth and power that everyday living becomes untenable labor. As Melissa Gregg and Gregory Segworth remind us:

Affect is in many ways synonymous with force of forces of encounter...At once intimate and impersonal, affect accumulates across both relatedness and interruptions in relatedness, becoming a palimpsest of force-encounters traversing the ebbs and swells of intensities that pass between “bodies” (bodies defined not by an outer skin-envelope or other surface boundary but by their potential to reciprocate or co-participate in passages of affect). Bindings and unbindings, becomings and un-becomings, jarring disorientations

and rhythmic attunements. Affect marks a body’s belonging to a world of encounters or; a world’s belonging to a body of encounters but also, in non-belonging, through all those far sadder (de)compositions of mutual in-compossibilities. Always there are ambiguous or “mixed” encounters that impinge and extrude for worse and for better, but (most usually) in-between.80

Song of Solomon’s cast of characters amend and augment such a working definition of affect, as it is the social performance of their mutual affectedness, the intractable ways in which they are publicly affected by their feelings toward one another, that so often takes center stage. For Morrison, belonging or nonbelonging to the world is a matter of recognition, and care, of whether or not we can ultimately belong to those we desire to belong to, whether we can experience the goodness of loving, and being loved back.81

Affect is always on the move throughout Song of Solomon, but is constantly working in both public and private space, always blurring the line between the inner life of a character and the way they are presented or present themselves to their fellow townspeople, friends or family. Time and time again, we see the sheer force which attends unrequited love unspool the central characters’ lives, few in as drastic a fashion as a secondary character named Porter, whose initial appearance in the text is its own argument for the singular power of non-belonging to warp one’s relation to the public sphere. While leaned out of an attic window, drunk and cradling a shotgun tightly but not too well, Porter speaks not only to his condition, but that of many characters to follow:

Tears streamed down his face and he cradled the barrel of the shotgun in his arms as though it were the woman he had been begging for, searching for, all his life. “Gimme hate, Lord,” he whimpered. “I’ll take hate any day. But don’t give me love. I can’t take no more love, Lord. I can’t carry it. Just like Mr. Smith. He couldn’t carry it. It’s too heavy. Jesus, you know. You know all about it. Ain’t it heavy? Jesus? Ain’t love heavy?


81 This, of course, is a riff on none other than that incomparable theorist of affect and relation, Teddy Pendergrass.
Porter elaborates for us here, early in the text, a corroboration of Robert Smith’s final claim, re-iterating that it was love, and not a desire to die, that led to Smith jumping off the roof of Mercy. Porter goes as far as to pray for the removal of said love, calling it an unbearable burden, heaviness fit to kill. Like Robert Smith before him, Porter seeks out higher ground to make such a proclamation about the workings of love as force, as mass, itself a gesture towards the desire for ascension that marks both of these men in their grandest moments of recognition. It is not the weight of love alone that Smith and Porter can no longer bear, but also the peculiar burden of their social position, the daily anguish of being cast low while dreaming of a life marked by transcendence. Porter’s great insight here is that the black men in the novel experience these weights not as counterbalancing forces, but in fact as dual obstacles to the forms of flight they dream of. To configure love in such a fashion, not solely as a liberating force but also as a potential antipode to such a force, is to conjure an expansive set of questions about the nature of kinship, about what it means to desire that which can destroy just as easily as it can make or mend.

It is the weight that attends this double-bind that produces not only Porter’s misery, and Smith’s desire to fly, but Milkman’s limp and obsession with appearance. His profound alienation from any robust engagement with the social world beyond what the people he encounters daily can do for him is in no small part a result of the ways in which his desire for love, and to love, have ended in tragic failure: his love for flight

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reduced to a dead man broken against concrete, his love for his father devolved into rote obedience. Rather than delight in the manifold joys of the social, Milkman chooses again and again throughout the text to seek out a certain kind of patrilineal security, any stable reminder that he has roots, a place set aside for him, something that is his and only his, that can be owned and never taken. It is primarily in this sense, in his relationship to private property and what he imagines private property makes possible, that Milkman most resembles his father. It is their singular obsession with what they believe that ownership can bequeath unto them, the world for which it serves as both lock and key, which binds them beyond blood tie. And it is the contrast between these two figures, Milkman and Macon, and the women in the novel that make the most prominent instances of bird imagery, and all that imagery suggests in this text, especially poignant.

Put differently, more even than gender as a category of pure difference, what separates the men and women in *Song of Solomon* are their expressed relationships to private property; what they believe that property ownership, as well as other forms of possession, opens up or forecloses as it pertains to the value of life as such, which is also to say, how property functions as a marker of their individual and collective personhood. The most compelling example of this divergence is found in Milkman’s aunt and Macon’s only sibling, Pilate Dead, and is on grand display during the first detailed interaction between Pilate and Milkman. After a brief exchange in which Pilate admonishes him for saying “hi” (which, according to Pilate, is something one only says to “pigs and sheep when you want em to move”83) instead of “hello,” the reader is granted a sketch of his initial impression of his aunt, the outcast and local legend:

Shame had flooded him. He had expected to feel it, but not that kind; to be embarrassed, yes, but not that way. She was the one who was ugly, dirty, poor, and drunk. The queer aunt whom his sixth-grade schoolmates teased him about and whom he hated because he felt personally responsible for her ugliness, her poverty, her dirt, and her wine. Instead she was making fun of his school, of his teachers, of him. And while she looked as poor as everyone said she was, something was missing from her eyes that should have confirmed it. Nor was she dirty; unkempt, yes, but not dirty. The whites of her fingernails were like ivory. And unless he knew absolutely nothing, this woman was definitely not drunk. Of course she was anything but pretty, yet he knew he could have watched her all day: the fingers pulling thread veins from the orange sections, the berry-black lips that made her look as though she wore make-up, the earring...And when she stood up, he all but gasped. She was as tall as his father, and head and shoulders taller than himself....She opened the door and they followed her into a large sunny room that looked both barren and cluttered. A moss-green sack hung from the ceiling. Candles were stuck in bottles everywhere; newspaper articles and magazine pictures were nailed to the walls. But other than a rocking chair, two straight-backed chairs, a large table, a sink and stove, there was no furniture. Pervading everything was the odor of pine and fermenting fruit.  

In a sense, Pilate’s home operates as an extension of her persona: the smell of fruit, its general unkemptness, as well as the emphasis on the beauty of interpersonal interaction over respectable presentation all serving as contributing factors to the sense of surprise that Milkman feels upon their first meeting.

The shame that Milkman experiences is a direct product of Pilate’s presence. Her everyday life doubles as a critique of his own. Put somewhat differently, Pilate’s willingness to carry on as she does works in direct opposition to all that Milkman has been taught to hold dear. Her house, her belongings, does not serve as a marker of hard-earned wealth or middle-class status. Rather, her home is a living space in every other sense of the term; it is a venue for gathering and flourishing, for fleshly abundance with no regulatory force in place to curtail its music. That Pilate’s house is also a house full of women—she lives with her two daughters, Hagar and Reba—is of central importance here; the absence of a dominant patriarch comes to index the absence of the desire for

84 Ibid, 39.
patriarchal codes of honor, order, and power. Hence, the black feminine comes to mark the possibility of another orientation in and toward the social world altogether in *Song of Solomon*, Pilate’s unwieldy, unruly household providing the reader with a view of what an alternative domesticity might look like, one centered around invention and the production of pleasure instead of regulation, or the maintenance of the current social order.

In contrast to a character like Macon Dead II, who has built his entire life on charging others to live, on going from house to house demanding that he be paid on time so that he might continue to amass his fortune as others struggle to live from day to day, Pilate stands out as a fugitive from normative ways of thinking about what counts as honest work, or labor worth living into. Much to Milkman’s surprise, she is poor and yet unashamed, unkempt and yet willing to comport herself with an indifference that belies her class position. The material wealth that Macon has spent his life pursuing—and indeed, has trained his son to pursue with similar tenacity—holds no weight for Pilate. This lack of interest in material wealth and its trappings is bodied forth in both her self-presentation and the home she keeps, a home that is largely devoid of saleable commodities but fit to burst with laughter, luck,\(^5\) love. She mocks the world Milkman comes from not out of envy, but what might be better described as a kind of confusion. Her insight into the restrictive character of a life centered on the accumulation serves to destabilize the appeal of such a lifestyle for both Milkman and the reader. Her every move indexes the possibility of another world.

\(^5\) Here, I’m thinking of Pilate’s unforgettable characterization of her eldest daughter: “…Reba wins things. She ain’t never lost nothing.”

At no point is the clash between Macon Dead II’s hyper-capitalism and the lovely chaos of Pilate Dead’s life philosophy more palpable than in Macon’s eventual plan to rob his sister once he discerns—calling, in that moment of realization, upon a long past skirmish-turned-lethal with an elderly stranger in a cave—that the aforementioned “moss-green sack hung from the ceiling” is actually filled with a dead man’s gold. From the outset, the heist appears to be a doomed mission, though it is not without its share of wonder:

Milkman stared off into the sky for inspiration, and while glancing toward the rooftops of the used-car places, he saw a white peacock poised on the roof of a long low building that served as headquarters for Nelson Buick. He was about to accept the presence of the bird as one of those waking dreams he was subject to whenever indecisiveness was confronted with reality, when Guitar opened his eyes and said “Goddam! Where’d that come from?” Milkman was relieved. “Must of come from the zoo.”

“That raggedy-ass zoo? Ain’t nothing in there but two tired monkeys and some snakes.”
“Well, where then?”
“Beats me.”
“Look—she’s flying down.” Milkman felt again his unrestrained joy at anything that could fly. “Some jive flying, but look at her strut.”
“He.”
“Huh?”
“He. That’s a he. The male is the only one got that tail full of jewelry. Son of a bitch. Look at that.” The peacock opened its tail wide. “Let’s catch it. Come on, Milk,” and Guitar started to run toward the fence…

“How come it can’t fly no better than a chicken?” Milkman asked.
“Too much tail. All that jewelry weighs it down. Like vanity. Can’t nobody fly with all that shit. Wanna fly, you got to give up the shit that weighs you down.”

The peacock jumped onto the hood of the Buick and once more spread its tail, sending the flashy Buick into oblivion.\(^{86}\)

In contradistinction to the failed flight which opens the novel, what Morrison presents here, through the body of the white peacock, is an image of flight that occupies a kind of middle ground, a “jive flying,” an airborne strut that conveys pride while also operating

as a performance of irreparable limitation. In a symbolic register, the white peacock in this scene enacts a confidence that belies its position in the social world of birds, its weighted, belabored ascension a mere shadow of other birds’ capacity for flight. As Guitar so astutely points out in the passage above, the peacock is a bird that wants to soar, and tries with all its might to achieve liftoff, but never quite reaches its goal.

In this scene, the peacock operates as an evocative stand-in for any number of male characters the reader encounters throughout *Song of Solomon*, the conflict between its desire for flight—that is, flight as both egress and ascension—and all that weighs it down serving as the grounds for such symbolic slippage. For Milkman and Guitar, mocking the peacock, and chasing it—at one point, Milkman even jokes that they should eat it—doubles as a moment of unconscious self-critique, as many of their criticisms of the peacock could just as easily be directed at their own lives. Milkman and Guitar too are figures that try over and over to achieve flight only to fail in one way or another. For Guitar, such freedom is bound up with seeking redress for the extrajudicial killing of African Americans through his labor with The Seven Days, a secret society devoted to killing one random white person for every black person unjustly slain. For Milkman, the metaphor is much more direct. Not unlike his father, Milkman is weighed down by both his desire for material wealth as well as the various material comforts that he already has, comforts which have helped produce the exact sort of vanity Guitar sees in the peacock. Not unlike Robert Smith, the white peacock is yet another anti-ideal mirror against which Milkman is forced to engage, consciously or otherwise, with the full weight of what holds him back, with how untenable his dreams appear against a world ruled by the law of gravity, the law of graves.
The white peacock is also, in this vein, a representative of the patriarchal white masculinity that Guitar and Milkman desire for themselves, the normative gender performance they yearn to embody. Guitar’s joke about catching and eating the peacock seems to support such a reading of this scene. His desire to consume the animal is also his desire to simultaneously mesh with it and destroy it, to make it a part of his body, have it pass into and fill him. By passage’s end, the white peacock is all Milkman and Guitar can see, its white tail having sent “the flashy Buick into oblivion.”87 Their desire for what the peacock represents, even as they mock it, blots out all else. The tension implicit in such desire, in the pair’s jeering which is inextricable from both the discomfort and the awe they feel in the presence of such a beautiful creature—think here about Guitar’s implicit claim that such a wondrous animal could never have come from their local, underfunded zoo, a zoo which boasts only a couple of monkeys and some snakes, common beasts, nothing worthy of visitation or praise—is illuminating as far as the libidinal economy of the text is concerned. The pair’s resentment for the peacock is also a kind of reverence. Because they cannot touch it, cannot become it, they mock its freedom to move, its capacity for flight. Think here of how the Buick is sent “into oblivion,” by the expansive, all-encompassing reach of the peacock’s tail, how such beauty, in a symbolic register, obscures the Buick, this ideal commodity, as a site of desire altogether. In lieu of the car, Milkman and Guitar yearn to either consume or denigrate the white peacock, to dominate it. This yearning that is also refusal, hatred, adoration, and envy, reflects well the forms of black patriarchal masculinity that Milkman enacts and embodies throughout the text. At every turn, there is an ongoing struggle between the complexity of what he feels, and

the narrowness of the world available to him, which makes such a performance always seem like an act of desperation or survival tactic. Rather than appear as yet another illusion inspired by the ongoing conflict between “indecisiveness” and “reality”88 that marks Milkman’s young adulthood, the peacock serves as a grand reminder of the young men’s joint purpose, the heist that will make it so that they too might be visible, dazzling, valuable enough to send anything else beautiful into oblivion:

But the bird had set them up. Instead of continuing the argument about how they would cop, they began to fantasize about what the gold could buy when it became legal tender. Guitar, eschewing his recent asceticism, allowed himself the pleasure of waking up old dreams: what he would buy for his grandmother and her brother, Uncle Billy, the one who had come up from Florida to help raise them all after his father died; the marker he would buy for his father’s grave, “pink with lilies carved on it”; then stuff for his brother and sisters, and his sisters’ children. Milkman fantasized too, but not for the stationary things Guitar described. Milkman wanted boats, cars, airplanes, and the command of a large crew. He would be whimsical, generous, mysterious with the money. But all the time he was laughing and going on about what he would do and how he planned to live, he was aware of the falseness in his voice. He wanted the money—desperately, he believed—but other than making tracks out of the city, far away from Not Doctor Street, and Sonny’s Shop, and Mary’s Place, and Hagar, he could not visualize a life that much different from the one he had. New people. New places. Command. That was what he wanted for his life...He screamed and shouted “Wooeeeee!” at Guitar’s list, but because his life was not unpleasant and even had a certain amount of luxury in addition to its comfort, he felt off center. He just wanted to beat a path away from his parents’ past, which was also their present and which was threatening to become his present as well.89

Here, the figure of the anti-ideal-I shows up not in the crashing body of Robert Smith, but Milkman’s parents. In a moment of intense, shared clarity with Guitar about what he would do if he had all of the material resources he had ever wanted, all Milkman can think of is the possibility of plotting an escape route from the life he has now. Rather than some grand purchase or marker of individual wealth, what Milkman seems to want more than anything else is a trap door, an accessible point of egress that will allow him to avoid


the image he sees staring back with startling clarity from the white peacock’s inimitable

glow: a life marked by material comfort but a lack of meaningful relation.

Still, what more can we make of the white peacock’s whiteness? How to read the
clear, chromatic distinction between the animal figure positioned here as a representative
not only of the “jive flying” that characterizes black male social life and its implicit
relationship to failure, but also the transcendant white masculinity that circumscribes that
life, and provides a context within such failure registers as failure, and the two black male
characters that people the scene? How does the peacock’s whiteness complicate its
viability as a symbol for black men’s experience of patriarchal masculinity, their
straining against it and striving towards it? Here, Frantz Fanon’s insight on white gaze
and black male experience is instructive:

I arrive slowly in the world; sudden emergences are no longer my habit. I crawl along.
The white gaze, the only valid one, is already dissecting me. I am fixed. Once their
microtomes are sharpened, the whites objectively cut sections of my reality. I have been
betrayed. I sense, I see in this white gaze that it’s the arrival not of a new man, but of a
new type of man, a new species. A Negro, in fact.90

Fanon’s recourse to the language of both validity and fixedness is helpful here, and
further elucidates the symbolic work of the peacock in this scene. The fixedness that
Fanon describes, an immobility produced by the intractable gaze of white civil society, is
inextricable from the wonder that Milkman and Guitar experience in this moment, the
way that the white peacock arrests their line of vision, demands their attention, and
ultimately spurs them to dream of obtaining wealth unlike anything they have seen
before. It is the validity of the white gaze, which is also to say, the seeming inescapability
of whiteness as the only source of legitimate validation for black men that anchors this
scene. Once confronted with the singular white object, Milkman and Guitar alike forget

themselves, and ultimately get lost in the fantasy of having what, to their minds, whiteness has within it: riches, social access, the capacity to provide for their kin.

What would necessarily attend such a reading is an engagement with what it means that the white peacock, even as a metaphorical stand-in for whiteness, cannot fly any “better than a chicken.” In this sense, Morrison’s white peacock is a signifier that comes with a critique of the signified built right in. From the moment the peacock appears, the notion of whiteness as pure transcendence is already unsettled. The white peacock flies no better than any other bird, and is thus a fraught, imperfect site of aspiration. It too, is laid low by vanity. Further, the peacock’s status as a double-signifier does the work of emphasizing the historical co-construction of white and black patriarchal masculinities. In *Song of Solomon*, these two modes of relation often share a body, and through that body puts on display the ways in which domination can and does take on a multiplicity of forms. Put differently, the text’s ongoing concern with how black men trying to emulate white men who are themselves trying to emulate the idea of a white man can, unwittingly or otherwise, enact certain forms of violence is instructive for those of us interested in the intersections of race and gender in the contemporary moment, and what those intersections tell us about the nebulous nature of power.

Milkman’s experiences with his family throughout *Song of Solomon* reflect this broader obsession with white patriarchal masculinity. In lieu of a more nurturing familial experience, what Milkman received instead was an inviolable set of rules about the proper relations between Man and the world as an ongoing conflict rooted in property and possession, in domination as a desirable mode of relation, and value as that which is

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found in human lives only to the extent that those lives can be leveraged for material gain or social status. In Milkman’s case, such ways of thinking are legible primarily through the figure of the inheritance. For his entire life, the relationship between his parents, as well as his father and the other residents of Not Doctor Street, was always a hierarchy grounded in the accrual of material goods. Even his parent’s marriage was, in a sense, always at its core an attempt by his father to move up in the world, to soar as best he could. The consequences of this weight, as well as this general orientation towards personal worth as an object that can only be attained through market relations, is made manifest in the moment where Milkman is called upon by the peacock’s presence to indulge in his wildest dreams and can come up with nothing worth telling. Rather than imagine a world made new by access and unlimited capital, Milkman can only praise the vision his best friend calls forth. This moment doubles as a critique, one might imagine, of Morrison’s broader argument in *Song of Solomon* about what a single-minded commitment to the accrual of material wealth can make of a person.\(^\text{92}\)

Thus, when a passerby early on in the novel says of Macon Dead II that “a nigger in business is a terrible thing to see,” the critique is less about Macon himself, and more about a relentless critique throughout the novel of the very desire for material wealth as such, for material wealth as a kind of given or natural marker of responsibility, beauty, or value. For Morrison, there are any number of other ways of thinking about value that have little or nothing to do with monetary gain, approaches that are exemplified in the

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\(^{92}\) It is telling that our first encounter with the figure of the peacock in the novel is not during the exchange between the white peacock, Milkman and Guitar, but during a flashback to the moment that Macon, having just killed a man in self-defense, discovers a bag of gold deep within the cave where he and Pilate have been sleeping after their father is murdered: “‘Gold,’ he whispered, and immediately, like a burglar out on his first job, stood up to pee. Life, safety, and luxury fanned out before him like the tail-spread of a peacock, and as he stood there trying to distinguish each delicious color, he saw the dusty boots of his father standing just on the other side of the shallow pit.”
way that Pilate Dead carries out her everyday life. Indeed, the ongoing conflict between Macon and Pilate throughout the text can be thought of not only as a matter of personal disagreement between two siblings, with much of the ill will, of course, residing on Macon’s side of things, but of philosophical irreconcilability, a clash of values embodied in their personal (e.g. the way that Pilate raises Hagar and Reba versus the way Macon raises Lena, First Corinthians and Milkman) and professional (Pilate as self-employed purveyor of wine versus Macon as landlord) lives. Milkman’s yearning for something more, something beyond what he has been raised to see value in, establishes him as a point of intersection between Macon and Pilate. He desires the sort of freedom that Pilate’s lifestyle makes possible, but is also wedded to the comfort and social cache of Macon’s approach.

For Milkman, the desire to shirk his parent’s present is also the desire to forego the false promise of the nuclear family and upper-middle class social status in favor of the unknown. As Morrison later makes clear, doing so will require that he go in search of something other than the lifestyle, which is also to say the legacy, that he has inherited from Macon. It will require him to seek out new modes of thinking relation beyond what patriarchy promises, something other than birthright, or dominion. It is a bit of tragic irony that Milkman’s quest for this sort of freedom, which is ultimately nothing other than freedom from the life his father has chosen, is inextricable from a plan that his father has laid out for him, a plan to steal the gold he believes Pilate has hanging from her ceiling. That this sack of gold turns out be little more than a bag full of human bones is a compelling, perverse turn; that said bones once belonged to Milkman’s godfather shifts the entire narrative in a wildly different direction. Now, instead of plotting a line of flight
away from his father’s past, Milkman will give all of himself to grasping a fuller picture of it. Rather than seek his own fortune, he will take on a different sort of journey altogether, an odyssey in the name of the Father.

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The symbolic relationship between flying and black fatherhood in *Song of Solomon* is an elaborate one for Morrison, a coupling intended to convey a familiar message that initially rings as dangerously close to something like pathology, but nonetheless displays radical potential in terms of how it allows us to read the ways that race, gender, and kinship are at work in the text. In a 1977 interview with Mel Watkins, Morrison states:

This book was different…men are more prominent. They interested me in a way I hadn’t thought about before, almost as a species. I used what I knew, what I’d heard. But I had to think of becoming a whole person in masculine terms, so there were craft problems. I couldn’t use the metaphors I’d used describing women. I needed something that suggested dominion—a different kind of drive.  

And, later on in the interview:

That’s why flying is the central metaphor in Song—the literal taking off and flying into the air, which is everybody’s dream. My children used to talk about it all the time—they were amazed when they found they couldn’t fly. They took it for granted that all they had to do was jump up and flap their arms. I used it not only in the African sense of whirling dervishes and getting out of one’s skin, but also in the majestic sense of a man who goes too far, whose adventures take him far away…black men travel, they split, they get on trains, they walk, they move. I used to hear those old men talk about traveling—which is not getting from here to there, it’s the process—they even named themselves after trains. It’s a part of black life, a positive, majestic thing, but there is a price to pay—the price is children. The fathers may soar, they may triumph, they may leave, but the children know who they are; they remember, half in glory and half in accusation. That is one of the points of Song: all the men have left someone, and it is the children who remember it, sing about it, mythologize it, make it a part of their family history.

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94 Ibid.
What to make of the seeming paradox Morrison lays out here? After leading off with the claim that the abundance of male characters in *Song of Solomon* pushed her to deploy an entirely different brand of metaphors than she had in her first two novels, *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*, metaphors implicitly tied to what we might think of, following Morrison, as a certain drive towards *dominion*, Morrison then pivots toward a characterization of the men in her novels as marked by an insatiable wanderlust. Though these dual visions of the male characters in *Song of Solomon* are in no way irreconcilable, they do present a compelling conflict as far as spatial metaphor is concerned; how does one singularly concerned with escape also live a life driven by the desire for dominion? And what does dominion mean for the specific subset of men whose lives Morrison is committed to exploring, men with very little access to traditional methods of accruing social status or power?

For these men, it appears, flight, or to use Morrison’s term, *travel*, is the primary means by which to achieve something resembling power or possession. For these failed men, men that can never own much of anything, can never quite live into dominance or dominion as a viable mode of relation, travel, and the absence from the home that naturally attends travel, perhaps also becomes a means of asserting control, offering proof that these men *matter*, in every sense of the term. In a related vein, that Morrison frames her concern with black male characterization as a matter of species is a fascinating choice, and seemingly reifies a certain kind of gender essentialism. What such a reading would necessarily elide, however, is what Morrison’s framing of black gender study as *species thinking* elucidates about the undeniable relationship between the practice of taxonomy and what Alexander Weheliye writes about the law’s tendency to “recognize
the humanity of racialized subjects only in the restricted idiom of personhood-as-ownership.” If personhood is tethered to ownership, of both one’s body as well as various forms of nonhuman, nonliving property, then what do we call the men that Morrison cites as her primary inspiration for the men in *Song of Solomon*, men who own little or nothing? How do we understand their personhood, over and against a world that categorically denies it, and indeed enforces such denial through quotidian forms of violence and surveillance?

The movement that Morrison gives voice to here, the desire to travel, to avoid being seen or held down, avails itself as a potential mode of thinking fugitivity through the pathology of the absent black father, who, as we see from the characterizations of black fathers that abound throughout *Song of Solomon*, is cast as absent even when is present, or is present in forms of orature or spectral matter *even when he is physically gone*. The black men in *Song of Solomon* trouble traditional ways of thinking about the dichotomy of absence and presence, and ultimately unsettle prevailing stereotypes about black paternity, including those that appear to animate Morrison’s commentary above. Even a generous reading of these comments would have to account for the framing of *Song of Solomon* as a text in which “all the men have left someone” and its connection to an antiquated discourse of black fatherhood as a paradox of sorts, a social institution that is in persistent peril, and through which many of the other, myriad problems that come to represent the lived experience of blackness in the United States can be traced and ultimately explained. The oft-cited 1965 study, *The Negro Family: The Case For* 

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"National Action," commonly referred to as “The Moynihan Report,” is illuminating in this regard:

In essence, the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is to out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well.

There is, presumably, no special reason why a society in which males are dominant in family relationships is to be preferred to a matriarchal arrangement. However, it is clearly a disadvantage for a minority group to be operating on one principle, while the great majority of the population, and the one with the most advantages to begin with, is operating on another. This is the present situation of the Negro. Ours is a society which presumes male leadership in private and public affairs. The arrangements of society facilitate such leadership and reward it. A subculture, such as that of the Negro American, in which this is not the pattern, is placed at a distinct disadvantage.\textsuperscript{96}

The above section, taken from the “The Tangle of Pathology” portion of the report, lays out a number of the document’s core principles. Moynihan’s argument here certainly includes elements of Morrison’s characterization of black men as habitually absent from their children’s lives—though she ascribes such absence to a yearning for adventure rather any sort of reaction to structural violence—but, in stark comparison to Morrison, Moynihan’s critical aim then lands squarely on the black women forced to care for the family units these vanishing black men leave in their wake.

Though Moynihan is certainly concerned with what he calls “desertion” as such—a concern that, it should be noted, is vividly illustrated in passages such as the following: “As a direct result of this high rate of divorce, separation, and desertion, a very large percent of Negro families are headed by females. While the percentage of such families among whites has been dropping since 1940, it has been rising among

Negroes"—his primary interest lies elsewhere, specifically in the irremediable danger of the matriarchal figure. For Moynihan, black mothers represent not only the foreclosure of the possibility of black inclusion on a broader scale, hence the “distinct disadvantage” he invokes toward the end of the passage, they also wreak a kind of interpersonal war on the black men in their lives. The “crushing burden” that Moynihan describes operates in this passage and beyond as subtext, as yet another explanation for the flight of the countless black men that serve as the report’s central object of sympathy. There is a legible desire throughout the report to interrogate and ultimately repair what Moynihan deems to be the broken order of things in black households; this desire, throughout the text, is linked to a larger concern not only about the collective future of black men specifically, but also the unique threat to prevailing gender norms nationwide that the presence of any noticeable percentage of formally educated, stably employed black women present. This pervasive fear is architectonic; the threat of black women as the heads of black American households is not only what holds Moynihan’s entire argument together, but also, at the level of feeling, seems intended to generate the concern that we see conveyed in the document’s title, the concern which necessarily attends any call for national action. The document itself doubles as an extensive performance of white male anxiety over what black families mean for the very notion of family as a stable object; how black families, if left unchecked, might erode the conceptual underpinnings of the nuclear family as a national institution.

97 Ibid.
For Moynihan then, the black male subjects of the report are rendered powerless, and ultimately broken, not by unrelenting and largely invisible systems of structural violence, but by the black women closest to them:

The effect on family functioning and role performance of this historical experience [economic deprivation] is what you might predict. Both as a husband and as a father the Negro male is made to feel inadequate, not because he is unlovable or unaffectionate, lacks intelligence or even a gray flannel suit. But in a society that measures a man by the size of his pay check, he doesn't stand very tall in a comparison with his white counterpart. To this situation he may react with withdrawal, bitterness toward society, aggression both within the family and racial group, self-hatred, or crime. Or he may escape through a number of avenues that help him to lose himself in fantasy or to compensate for his low status through a variety of exploits. 98

The vision of black men presented in this portion of the Moynihan report is far afield of what Morrison describes. Still, what remains worthy of note here is Moynihan’s gesture toward the psychic toll that the capitalist character of white civil society takes on black men, a toll that Morrison not only accounts for, but posits as a central conflict in Song of Solomon, though without ever resorting to the kind of wrongheaded, casually sexist theorizing on display in the Moynihan Report. Morrison sees pride, and even vanity, where Moynihan sees only despair and despondence, men who are unable to strut though such comportment is, for him, “the very essence of the male animal.” 99 Again, black masculinity appears here as a problem of species, of how to account for these men that are not men, men that are “holes,” to use Lewis Gordon’s language, and thus not only nonhuman but also invisible, intangible. Though critical differences abound, it should be noted that Morrison and Moynihan alike respond to the same phenomenon: the despair produced by the promise of patriarchal masculinity, the promise that is by its very nature

98 Ibid.
99 Ibid.
unrealizable, and especially so for black men like the ones Morrison describes, men who must daily confront the reality of their own social and economic fixity, a fixity which doubles as a kind of disqualification from the province of the masculine, the human.

That Moynihan is unable to think simultaneously about both the anguish these men are experiencing and the singular burden that such anguish places on their partners is altogether unsurprising. For Moynihan, the crisis of black masculinity must take center stage. Everything else, from disparities in educational attainment to under-employment, is posited as either a direct cause or result of this phenomenon. Morrison too sees black men’s desire for an elsewhere, and the flight from home that is commonly cast as its direct product, as an issue that profoundly affects black social life, and yet, in stark contrast to Moynihan, she posits this leaving as “a positive, majestic thing”\textsuperscript{101} rather than as a pervasive social ill.

Placing Moynihan to the side for a moment, what are we to make of such a claim on Morrison’s part? How to reconcile the waves of critical attention devoted to the supposed ubiquity of the black absentee father\textsuperscript{102} with Morrison’s contention here that a father’s search for another life might be a much more complex affair, one greeted with a certain ambivalence even by their children, who remember them “half in glory and half in accusation”\textsuperscript{103}? Morrison’s argument that the children of the men in question—or, put differently and perhaps more pointedly, the very concept of these men’s abandoned

\begin{footnotes}
\item\textsuperscript{101}Toni Morrison and Danielle Kathleen Guthrie. \textit{Conversations with Toni Morrison}. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994.
\item\textsuperscript{103}Toni Morrison and Danille Kathleen Guthrie. \textit{Conversations with Toni Morrison}. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994.
\end{footnotes}
children—turn their lives into stories, and myths in particular, once they leave is worth our attention, and is echoed in David Marriot’s most recent book, *On Black Men.*

Marriott writes:

> Hence the mark that the black father leaves, a mark that is both ineffaceable and irremediable. Typed, in the wider culture, as the cause of, and cure for, black men’s ‘failure’, his father’s apparently lost, and untellable, life is the story that the son must find and narrate if he is to begin to understand how, and why, blackness has come to represent an inheritable fault […] ‘What is wrong with black fathers? What is wrong with black men?’; these questions loom over postwar American culture, part of a more pervasive anxiety about the decline of paternal authority, the so-called ‘crisis’ of masculinity in contemporary cultural life. A monumental crisis: for black men, the despair of living knowing that life itself is always in question, interfered with, disrupted […]

In Marriott, as in Morrison and Moynihan, the black father appears as a figure of tremendous social import on the national scale. Through the body of the always already absent black father, patriarchal anxiety is eased or elevated, policy changes come into being, prisons are built. For Marriott, it is the role of the son to tell the father’s story, and to use that narrative as a means through which he might navigate a world that hates him just as it hated his father, that calls his father’s presence an illusion, his absence an inevitability. The question remains: what becomes of black women when black families, and black social life in a broader sense, is conceived of primarily in these terms? How might we craft a mode of reading and being together in the world that can account for the divergent ways in which white supremacist capitalist patriarchy acts differently, though always simultaneously, even and especially under the guise of material benefit, on black men and black women?

In an effort to engage such questions, I want to turn to a 1984 conversation between James Baldwin and Audre Lorde held in the pages of *Essence* Magazine:

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JB: Do you know what happens to a man when he’s ashamed of himself when he can’t find a job? When his socks stink? When he can’t protect anybody? When he can’t do anything? Do you know what happens to a man when he can’t face his children because he’s ashamed of himself? It’s not like being a woman…

AL: No, that’s right. Do you know what happens to a woman who gives birth, who puts that child out there and has to go out and hook to feed it? Do you know what happens to a woman who goes crazy and beats her kids across the room because she’s so full of frustration and anger? Do you know what that is? Do you know what happens to a lesbian who sees her woman and her child beaten on the street while six other guys are holding her? Do you know what that feels like?105

What emerges from the dynamic tension of Baldwin and Lorde’s position in this passage is a toolbox for rethinking a number of the central conflicts not only in *Song of Solomon*, but Morrison’s entire corpus, conflicts staged over gender and energized by the central question of what it means not only to suffer, but to suffer solely *because* one is black and not yet dead, because of a black feminine or black masculine identification that is marked as a site of danger in need of regulatory force. What the conversation between Lorde and Baldwin here brings to the fore are the ways in which either position is rendered incommunicable,106 at least in part, because of the scale at which the particular forms of violence being discussed take place. The kinds of ongoing, structural violation described by both authors stand out from this passage as an impasse which appears too high to get over, too wide to get around. As both their conversation, and the repeated inter- and intra-gender conflicts in *Song of Solomon* make plain, there is a deep-seated anguish here that must be accounted for in a conversation about the tragic interplay between black social life and antiblack social systems, the need for a more robust language with which to analyze the sorts of interpersonal turmoil both Lorde and Baldwin describe.


What becomes clear by interview’s end is that although both Baldwin and Lorde—operating here as representative figures of sorts, though certainly not in any of totalizing or comprehensive fashion—do not and perhaps cannot fully comprehend each other’s struggles at the level of experience; there is a fundamental difference at play in terms of how their respective battles against patriarchy are structured, a difference that requires something other than an uncomplicated vision of black power which would elide gender particularity in the name of racial uplift. What the conversation between Lorde and Baldwin emphasizes, and in its best moments enacts, is an empathy that Moynihan simply cannot fathom, an empathy that materializes as an ongoing engagement with the everyday experiences of black women and black men, and ultimately produces a space of radical co-laboring within the conversation itself, an exchange which is something other than and in excess of the violent division Moynihan describes.

Baldwin’s invocation of the ways in which predatory capitalism operates in the everyday as a persistent assault on the pride of black men signals a return to the set of questions Morrison implicitly lays out in describing the men that purportedly inspired *Song of Solomon*. For the black men who cannot derive their sense of pride from traditional modes of accruing and maintaining wealth, there must be alternate means of producing self-esteem and dignity, modes that, for Morrison, are often linked to movement, changing names, being, in every meaningful sense, untouchable. This tension between black fatherhood and flight, which is at its core a conflict staged over names, the family name, the name of the son who mythologizes the father, re-naming him and thus making him is own, is in no place more vivid in *Song of Solomon* than in the text’s final movement, during Milkman’s journey to Shalimar, the small town where he hopes to
unearth the family history that has eluded him to this point in the novel. Milkman succeeds in this goal, ultimately decrypting an old fable the town’s children sing en route to coming upon, in a conversation with a local resident by the name of Susan Byrd, the backstory of the charismatic black male figure around whom the entire town, and in some ways the entire text, has been built:

“Why did you call Solomon a flying African?”

“Oh, that’s just some old folks lie they tell around here. Some of those Africans they brought over here as slaves could fly. A lot of them flew back to Africa. The one around here who did this was same Solomon, or Shalimar—I never knew which was right. He had a slew of children, all over the place. You may have noticed that everybody around here claims kin to him. Must be over forty families spread in these hills calling themselves Solomon something or other. I guess he must have been hot stuff.” She laughed. “But anyway, hot stuff or not, he disappeared and left everybody. Wife, everybody, including some twenty-one children. And they say they all saw him go. The wife saw him and the children saw him. They were all working in the fields. They used to try to grow cotton here. Can you imagine? In these hills? [...]Well, back to this Jake boy. He was supposed to be one of Solomon’s original twenty-one—all boys and all of them with the same mother. Jake was the baby. The baby and the wife were next to him when he flew off.”

“When you say ‘flew off’ you mean he ran away, don’t you? Escaped?”

“No, I mean flew. Oh, it just foolishness, you know, but according to the story he wasn’t running away. He was flying. He flew. You know, like a bird. Just stood up in the fields one day, ran up some hill, spun around a couple of times, and was lifted up in the air. Went right on back to wherever it was he came from. There’s a big double-headed rock over the valley named for him. It like to killed the woman, the wife. I guess you could say ‘wife.’ Anyway she’s supposed to have screamed out loud for days. And there’s a ravine near here they call Ryna’s Gulch, and sometimes you can hear this funny sound by it that the wind makes. People say it’s the wife, Solomon’s wife, crying. Her name was Ryna. They say she screamed and screamed, lost her mind completely. You don’t hear about women like that anymore, but there used to be more—the kind of woman that couldn’t live without a particular man. And when the man left, they lost their minds, or died or something. Love, I guess. But I always thought it was trying to take care of children by themselves, you know what I mean?”

Here, in Susan Byrd’s re-telling of an age-old local myth, we hear an echo of Porter’s lament earlier in the novel, his desire to be released from the heaviness of love lest it

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crush him. By the end of her account, Susan Byrd’s vision of Solomon’s life reads not only as a moment of clarification, but as an encapsulation of the broader themes we have seen throughout the novel: black men’s pride, their desire for flight, and how both complicate and contaminate the possibilities of black fatherhood. Here, as elsewhere in her writings, there is a profound empathy for black men, an empathy that does not require her to put black women’s experiences under erasure.

In this scene of origin, the moment where Solomon, the father of the father of the father, is finally unveiled, he is depicted as both singularly elegant and thoroughly delinquent; “hot stuff” to the point that an entire town desires to be associated with him, but ultimately selfish enough to leave everyone he loves behind in the name of self-possession. Not unlike Milkman, Solomon, it would appear, values his own mobility more than he does the women whose invisible labor makes his very life possible. It is this willingness to pursue freedom at all costs that is Milkman’s true inheritance from Solomon and Macon and Robert Smith alike, all of whom did not hesitate to put their own desires—whether it was for love or property or an elsewhere they could neither name nor touch—before the direct needs of their families. Ryna, Ruth, Lena, First Corinthians, Hagar, Pilate: all lose their lives in one way or another, either to the grave or a kind of quiet, internal death, for the sake of the men whose failure to fly—desperate as they might be for an exit, an exhale—constitutes the grounds of their identity. For Morrison, this is the central conflict of the black masculine: this love that feels like heaviness, this sense of always being watched. From this angle, the oft-repeated claim throughout the book that “everybody wants the life of a black man”\textsuperscript{108} appears not only as

a claim about a social world in which black men are made hypervisible as both objects of sexual desire and threats to the safety of the public at large, but also a gesture toward the inner life of the black men in the novel, black men who feel wanted but never fully known. In *Song of Solomon*, what emerges from such yearning is a tendency toward abandonment, and a persistent choosing of certain forms of male kinship\(^{109}\) (friend-friend, father-son, even stranger-stranger) over relationships to and with women that might extend beyond the erotic or the extractive.

When Milkman is finally able to walk without limping, we are led to believe he has been transformed by the pride he feels after the doe hunt, a pride derived from the company and praise of other men\(^{110}\). The natural continuation of this metaphor, the moment he learns to fly, is also linked to his relationship with other men in the text, not only Solomon, but Guitar. Juxtaposed against the specter of Pilate’s dead body, herself slain at the hands of a man who desired Milkman’s life more than he ever cared about hers or that of most other women outside of a certain sense of intra-racial propriety,\(^{111}\) Milkman is able to soar, if only to fly “into killing arms of his brother.”\(^{112}\) Even in this

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\(^{109}\) A number of which, it should be noted, are marked by the presence of birds. Not only the aforementioned peacock, but also the moment where “a black rooster strutted by, its blood-red comb draped forward like a wicked brow” right before Milkman gets into a fistfight with a group of men from the area. See Ibid, 265.

\(^{110}\) Indeed, this also the moment where the white peacock appears for the final time. The creature is described by the narrator as soaring away, ultimately alighting “on the hood of blue Buick” elsewhere. See Ibid, 283.

\(^{111}\) The following exchange between Milkman and Guitar reflects this broader trend throughout the book:

“Yeah, but except for skin color, I can’t tell the difference between what the white women want from us and what the colored women want. You say they all want our life, our living life. So if a colored woman is raped and killed, why do the Days rape and kill a white woman? Why worry about the colored woman at all?” Guitar cocked his head and looked sideways at Milkman. His nostrils flared a little. “Because she’s mine.”

See Ibid 223.

\(^{112}\) Ibid, 337.
final scene, a moment predicated upon the seeming impossibility of a black male kinship bond that does not necessitate some form of violence—from either civil society or from within the bond itself—there is nonetheless the trace of love, the heartbreak that drove Guitar, not unlike Hagar, to want to take Milkman’s life once he suspected him of betrayal. For Morrison, the black masculine is composed of all these divergent elements operating in dynamic, dangerous tension; it is this fear and this joy, this pain and this hunger, which anchors the black masculine though it does not represent its totality. To the very end, these figures are complicated to the point of contradiction. They are ugly, and beautiful too.\textsuperscript{113}

\textsuperscript{113} See Hughes, Langston. The Negro artist and the racial mountain. 1926.
Lords of Sounds of and Lesser Things: Muleness as Black Feminist Modality in Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God

Work might be better conceptualized by examining the range of work that African-American women actually perform. Work as alienated labor can be economically exploitative, physically demanding, and intellectually deadening—the type of work long associated with Black women’s status as “mule.” Alienated labor can be paid—the case of Black women in domestic service, those Black women working as dishwashers, dry-cleaning assistants, cooks, and health-care assistants, as well as some professional Black women engaged in corporate mammy work; or it can be unpaid, as with the seemingly never-ending chores of many Black grandmothers and Black single mothers. But work can also be empowering and creative, even if it physically challenging and appears to be demeaning.

—Patricia Hill Collins, Black Feminist Thought

My principal question, phrased plainly, is: what different modalities of the human come to light if we do not take the liberal humanist figure of Man as the master-subject but focus on how humanity has been imagined and lived by those subjects excluded from this domain?

—Alexander G. Weheliye, Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human

Let’s face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name. “Peaches” and “Brown Sugar,” “Sapphire” and “Earth Mother,” “Aunty,” “Granny,” God’s “Holy Fool,” a “Miss Ebony First,” or “Black Woman at the Podium”: I describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth. My country needs me, and I were not here, I would have to be invented.

—Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book”

Throughout Zora Neale Hurston’s corpus, we find any number of moments marked by the presence of nonhuman animals that buck expectations rooted in a normative zoological framework for creaturely behavior—consider the goat that flags a train in Mules and Men, or the revenge-seeking rattlesnake in her short story, “Sweat”—but nowhere is this desire to render the insurgent potential of animal life more vividly on display than in her 1937 masterwork, Their Eyes Were Watching God. Therein, Hurston crafts a world in which animals perform species in a fashion that destabilizes and defamiliarizes normative expectations around not only animal interiority, but also animal
sociality. For the purposes of this essay, I am interested in how Hurston’s use of the figure of the mule in particular might elucidate new pathways for thinking at the intersections of blackness, animality, and gender; how her persistent emphasis on the disparate kinds of violation, silencing, and suppression that circumscribe black women’s everyday experiences—especially when such violation is juxtaposed against spectacular scenes of violence against nonhuman animals, and explicitly linked to the experience of those animals by the text’s central characters—helps us to think not only about muleness as a critical agent in Their Eyes Were Watching God, but the mule as a figure of central importance in the field of black feminist thought.

My aim herein is to offer just this sort of alternative reading, one that strains against the grain of how the mule has historically been marked in 20th century literary criticism and elsewhere, that is, as largely or solely a site of gendered oppression, labor that is taken-for-granted and rendered imperceptible. Though I will argue that these regulatory forces are often at work when the mule appears on the scene as a signifier, I will also argue that such forces are never the totality of what is present; that muleness represents not only otherworldly duress, but also the potential for an otherwise world, that is, a radically different set of social and political relations, in the midst of and in spite of that constraint.

Hence, what follows is an extended reading of the way that muleness moves through the text as an analytic of power, how Hurston returns to the figure of the mule again and again—sometimes even when there are no mules as such present in a given scene—in order to elucidate the power relations that produce the mule not only as a form of animal life, which is also to say, a creature invented for the sake of labor and labor
alone, but also as a useful metonym for describing the experiences of black women living under patriarchy’s unremitting pressures. Through a close reading of several key scenes from the text, and an engagement with black feminist thinkers such as Hortense Spillers, I intend to make an argument not only for the mule as an especially generative site of inquiry and imagination in Hurston’s oeuvre, but in the field of black literary theory more broadly. I seek to illuminate the ways in which a critical engagement with muleness—both as a zoological category with its own fraught history as it pertains to agriculture and subsistence farming in the Americas, as well as a useful metonym for thinking about the nature of black social life—opens up a number of different avenues through which we might approach Their Eyes Were Watching God as a part of Hurston’s broader corpus, in which bestial presence is almost always a narrative component that must be reckoned with. This essay is intended to reflect the inherent multiplicity of muleness as a means of indexing value, as well as to keep track of the indeterminate, uncanny workings of the black feminine in a text that is deeply concerned with how we might read persistence, and even abundance, in spaces, and most centrally, onto forms of human and nonhuman life, that are traditionally marked as non-sites, as vitalized forms of death. It is precisely this critical practice of valuing black and nonhuman life, over and against dominant ways of thinking about or assigning such value that, I will argue, is what Hurston wants us to consider when muleness enters the frame.

Whenever Hurston gestures towards the mule, it is a call for us to keep an eye on those that are rendered invisible, whether by force of law, or quotidian social practice. Indeed, it is the seemingly banal nature of the moments that Hurston draws our attention to, the casualness of the violence deployed against the black women who are treated and
discussed as “mules” in the text, as well as the actual mules that also make an appearance as these women’s metonymic counterparts and fellow targets of men who treat said violence as an explicit means of control or even, oft times, recreation, that are of central concern here. Muleness is inextricably linked to this sort of routine violation: the taken-for-granted suffering that occurs beyond the power or purview of social accountability.

Still, this is not all the figure of the mule makes available to us. Though Hurston certainly returns to the mule repeatedly as a site of unspoken, and unspeakable, violence, there are also other moments in the novel where it becomes clear that Hurston is also interested in the mule as a site of political possibility, of radical imagination set free by misrecognition. Put differently, in addition to functioning as a site of invisibilized suffering and invisibilized labor, the mule also represents a certain kind of invisibilized interiority, a black feminist apositionality that bears a striking resemblance to something like freedom in the hold, like fugitivity, like Harriet Jacobs crafting a new life, and a new vision, from within the loophole of retreat, using the epistolary form to take flight though she could neither walk nor stand. Thus, when Hurston describes the black woman as the mule of the world, it is clear that this is not only a claim about suffering. For Hurston, muleness is how we might think about black women’s kinesthetic and otherwise brilliance in a world bent on their capture. It is how Janie Crawford, as well as the larger ensemble of women she is a part of in this timeless, precious text, laugh and lilt and love, knowing they were never meant to survive.

114 For more on Harriet Jacobs’ use of the epistolary form as a mode of fugitive resistance, see Harriet Jacobs. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl.* Start Publishing LLC, 2013.

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From the first time the mule appears on the scene as a representation of the black feminine, it is abundantly clear that muleness is inextricably linked to a certain recalcitrance, or refusal to be owned, over and against a set of social relations centered on the treatment of black women’s every thought, deed, or movement as a form of private property. This relationship between gender and property, between the dominant order and the otherwise possibilities the mule carries in its wake, are further elaborated upon by Janie’s grandmother, Nanny, early on in the novel:

You know, honey, us colored folks is branches without roots and that makes things come round in queer ways. You in particular. Ah was born back due in slavery so it wasn’t for me to fulfill my dreams of what a woman oughta be and to do. Dat’s one of de holdbacks of slavery. But nothing can’t stop you from wishin.’ You can’t beat nobody down so low till you can rob ’em of they will. Ah didn’t want to be used for a work-ox and a brood-sow and Ah didn’t want mah daughter used dat way neither. It sho wasn’t mah will for things to happen lak they did. Ah even got another chance. Ah high, but they wasn’t pulpit for said Ah’d take a broom and a She would expound what Ah Ah knowed here you was in de de text for you. Ah been waitin’ you just take a stand on high happened.

Here, the figure of the dream appears, not as a dream deferred, but a dream destroyed by material circumstance. That dream, in this instance, differs from Janie’s first dead dream in the novel—concerned as it was, primarily, with pleasure and autonomy in the midst of a monogamous love relationship. This is a dream with a different, though related set of stakes, a dream of access to the province of the human in ways that black women have been barred from historically.

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118 Ibid, 57.
With stunning regularity, Nanny turns to animal figures in order to give an account of her life experience: her “dreams of whut a woman oughta be and to do” are in direct conflict with her being “used for a work-ox and a brood-sow” by those who claimed legal ownership over her flesh, her labor, and indeed, her very life. Though the mule is not explicitly invoked in this passage, its haunting presence is nonetheless felt in the language used here to describe the daily experiences of black women living under the conditions of chattel slavery. There is not only the constant threat of interpersonal violence, both physical and psychic, at the hands of black men—as we see so vividly in Janie’s relationships—but an expulsion from the field of the human subject, the self-possessed agent in control of the functions of one’s own body. What appears instead is a vision of life as an invention, a machine, what Marx might call “a speaking implement.”

For Nanny, the black feminine is a site marred by its relationship to death and quotidian violence, but it is not only that. As she reminds the reader early on: “nothing can’t stop you from wishin. You can’t beat nobody down so low till you can rob ’em of they will.”

Though she spends her days in the midst of what many would call unlivable conditions, Nanny keeps right on wishing, dreaming, sketching out a line of flight. This enactment of the freedom drive is directly linked to the “queer ways” that Nanny describes in the opening lines of the passage. That is, it is exactly the sort of rootlessness that Nanny gives language to, a rootlessness which is also an ongoing, lived critique of


patriarchal models of family structure, and kinship broadly construed, which feeds her radical imagination, her meditative tenacity in the face of the gratuitous violence. These queer ways are intimately linked to Hortense Spillers’ claim in her seminal essay, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” regarding the ways in which the black feminine operates in contrast to and as a criticism of normative hierarchies and cartographies of gender:

But I would make a distinction [...] between “body” and “flesh” and impose that distinction as the central one between captive and liberated subject positions. In that sense, before the “body” there is the “flesh” zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse or the reflexes of iconography [...] As Elaine Scarry describes the mechanisms of torture, these lacerations, wounding, fissures, tears, scars, openings, ruptures, lesions, rendings, and punctures of the flesh create the distance between what I would designate a cultural vestibularity and culture [...] This body whose flesh carries the female and the male to the frontiers of survival bears in person the marks of a cultural text whose inside has been turned outside. 122

Spillers goes on to elaborate upon this relationship between captivity, flesh and vestibularity, naming the black woman, and the black feminine in a broader sense, as a locale at which these three terms intersect with peculiar force:

The flesh as the concentration of “ethnicity” that contemporary critical discourses neither acknowledge nor discourse away. It is this “flesh and blood” entity, in the vestibule (or “pre-view”) of a colonized North America, that is essentially rejected from “The Female Body in Western Culture,” but it makes good theory, or commemorative “herstory” to want to “forget” or have failed to realize, that the African female subject, under these historic conditions, is not only the target of rape—in one sense, an interiorized violation of body and mind—but also the imagine as the peculiar body strung from a tree of the “overseer,” lexical and living materialized scene of and a theory, a text for mediations. 123


123 Ibid, 67.
What new possibilities for thinking about the relationship between blackness, gender, and animal life emerge if we take seriously Spillers claims here about both the flesh and what she calls vestibularity? How might we reconcile such theorizing with Nanny’s own philosophy of race, labor, and gender, in which the very ungendering that Spillers names here is described through the aforementioned invocations of the work-ox and the brood-sow? For Nanny then, as for Spillers, ungendering is also a transformation at the level of species, it is how one is forcibly removed from the province of the human and placed elsewhere.

This violence that both Spillers and Nanny name is what bars the flesh from entering the realm of the body; indeed, it is this very availability to such violence and violation that is part of what constitutes the flesh as such. And yet the flesh is not only or always a site of terror. It is also, according to Spillers, a site of tremendous possibility. The flesh, as Elizabeth Grosz reminds us, “supercedes the ontological distinction…between the animal and the human.”

The flesh, in the first instance, is shared, and is not inextricably linked to the image of a self-possessed subject that has no need of sociality. Hence, when Spillers invokes the vestibule, positing black flesh as vestibular to what she calls U.S. American “culture,” we know that she is also gesturing toward the myriad social possibilities that the flesh makes available to us, possibilities that the body cannot contain or condone.

After all, what is the vestibule if not a space for outsiders? For sinners and latecomers too tired from last night’s revelry to rise with the saints? Spiller’s invocation of the vestibule is also a call to envision unorthodox socialities, to blur the lines between

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person and thing, human and animal, that the historically marginalized might gather together in the name of a far more compelling project, one more true to the countless, uncanny lives that have never fit within subjectivity’s narrow borders. When we take the vestibule seriously as a site for gathering, we are able to read, for example, the conflict between Janie and her second husband, Jody, as not only a moment of unethical, interpersonal violence, but also an occasion to reckon with what such terror produces and forecloses. Jody’s desire to rule Janie, to dominate her and all that she lays her hands to, closes him off to an entire world that Janie has access to, a world in which “flies [are] tumbling and singing, marrying and giving in marriage,”¹²⁵ and “a dust-bearing bee sink[s] into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch[ing] to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight.”¹²⁶ As Hurston’s descriptions of her sense of the natural world throughout the text make clear, Janie’s pervasive boredom during her time with Logan, or her fear and shame during her time with Jody, are not totalizing forces; in spite of, and alongside these unrelenting impositions, Janie develops the capacity for ethical relation with other forms of life that are also made subject to the violent whims of men. In this sense, Janie moves through the text as an ecofeminist figure par excellence,¹²⁷ one that is always thinking capaciously about the ecological realm, and the constellation of affects that it produces. This too is an example of the “insurgent ground of the female social subject” that Spillers references towards the end of her essay. This is


¹²⁶ Ibid, 43.

what lingering in the vestibule makes possible.

Rather than aspire to domination or control, Janie instead lives into the myriad communal potentialities of the flesh, and in the process, is able to achieve something akin to solidarity with the nonhuman actors all around her:

Take for instance the case of Matt Bonner’s yellow mule. They had him up for conversation every day the Lord sent. Most especial if Matt was there himself to listen. Sam and Lige and Walter were the ringleaders of the mule-talkers. The others threw in whatever they could chance upon, but it seemed as if Sam and Lige and Walter could hear and see more about that mule than the whole county put together. All they needed was to see Matt’s long spare shape coming down the street and by the time he got to the porch they were ready for him […] When the mule was in front of the store, Lum went out and tackled him. The brute jerked up his head, laid back his ears and rushed to the attack. Lum had to run for safety. Five or six more men left the porch and surrounded the fractious beast, goosing him in the sides and making him show his temper. But he had more spirit left than body. He was soon panting and heaving from the effort of spinning his old carcass about. Everybody was having fun at the mule-baiting. All but Janie. She snatched her head away from the spectacle and began muttering to herself. “They oughta be shamed uh theyselves! Teasin’ dat poor brute beast lak they is! Done been worked tuh death; done had his disposition ruint wid mistreatment, and now they got tuh finish devilin’ im tuh death. Wisht Ah had mah way wid ’em all.”

What Janie enacts in this scene is a form of interspecies empathy that bears no resemblance to a limited, self-serving vision of humaneness, but instead a reckoning with the suffering of nonhuman beings that demands intercession, if only at the level of desire. Given her social position not only within the town itself, but hegemonic gender relations broadly construed, the insight we are granted into Janie’s mind here is illustrative. Though she cannot act on the mule’s behalf in the way that she would like, cannot intercede and enact physical violence against the men tormenting the mule that it might go free, she dares to bear witness, to give voice to what she has seen even if it is only a whisper, a muttering once her head is turned in revulsion. That this is all she can reasonably do, that is, speak of the unremitting violence she has witnessed, demands our

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attention.

What’s more, it should be noted that the profound anger Janie expresses towards these men is, all on its own, a radical intervention given prevailing historical\(^{129}\) and contemporary\(^{130}\) discourses around the supposed incapacity of black people as it pertains to the love and care of nonhuman animal lives. What blossoms at the intersection of these two components of the scene—both Janie’s overwhelming rage and the quiet protest that, due to her social position, serves as its only reflection in the material world—is a black feminist approach to engaging bestial presence that returns throughout the novel. Though Janie cannot physically lash out here, cannot harm the men the way they are harming the mule, or even attempt to gain revenge by taking on the mule’s approach to resistant practice—*charging and missing, charging and missing*—she gives utterance, and what’s more, dares to imagine an alternate approach to the organization of human and nonhuman life, and eventually gives voice to that imagining. Ultimately, it is this quiet dissent that serves as the condition of possibility for the mule’s release. Jody, having overheard Janie without her knowing it, stops laughing when he realizes how she feels about the abuse of Matt Bonner’s mule, and ultimately uses his social influence to bring the scene to a halt: “Lum, I god, dat’s enough! Y’all done had yo’ fun now. Stop yo’ foolishness and go tell Matt Bonner Ah wants tuh have uh talk wid him right away.”\(^{131}\)

After haggling with Bonner for several minutes, Jody purchases the mule, effectively setting him free to live out his last days without the threat of the yoke or a

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stranger’s fist. During this period, the “free mule,” as the townspeople come to refer to him, becomes the subject of all manner of fables, what the narrator refers to as “lies…about his free-mule doings.” Thus, it is through the social practices of gossip, and storying, that the free mule becomes recognizable as a citizen of the town.

Through his entry into the forms of orature the townspeople hold dear, he comes to be granted a personhood not limited to the law, or the boundaries of zoological discourse. Through his manumission at the hands of Jody, which was itself the result of Janie Crawford’s quiet protestations, the free mule’s life comes to represent something other than a citizenship bound to the province of the human, and what’s more, a critique of that very category, barred from it as he was only moments before his purchase:

But way after a while he died. Lum found him under the big tree on his raw bony back with all four feet up in the air. That wasn’t natural and it didn’t look right, but Sam said it would have been more unnatural for him to have laid down on his side and died like any other beast. He had seen Death coming and had stood his ground and fought it like a natural man. He had fought it to the last breath. Naturally he didn’t have time to straighten himself out. Death had to take him like it found him. When the news got around, it was like the end of a war or something like that. Everybody that could knocked off from work to stand around and talk. But finally there was nothing to do but drag him out like all other dead brutes. Drag him out to the edge of the hammock which was far enough off to satisfy sanitary conditions in the town. The rest was up to the buzzards.

The moment the free mule dies, any number of dominant categories are blurred beyond recognition or rescue. Somehow, all at once, the free mule is a “natural man” and a beast and a brute; a prophet that foresees death, as well as a warrior willing to fight it until he can no longer stand. Such multiplicity—that is, the naming of the mule as the nexus of all of these divergent figures through which non/human life is described or else held at

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132 Ibid, 95.

133 For more on storying as an African American expressive practice, see Young, Kevin. The grey album: On the blackness of blackness. Macmillan, 2012.

134 Ibid, 96.
bay— is the product of a broader commitment to thinking critically about entanglement, and *interior life*, that permeates the text, a willingness to engage all living things within the world of the novel, both human and nonhuman, as entities that are always already in motion, in process, and thus composed of untold, untapped possibilities. To give an account of the mule’s death in the fashion that the townspeople do is to count him as one of their own, to dethrone normative approaches to thinking about the chain of being in favor of an unbounded constellation of affects and assemblages, hierarchy laid low for the sake of relation. That such a decision is made in the wake of the free mule suffering various forms of physical and psychic violence at the hands of Matt Bonner, Lum and others is of no small consequence.

Here, Hurston is pushing the reader to consider not only the townspeople’s radical imagination as it pertains to the animal’s potential for sociality, but indeed their all-too-human pettiness. What is evident both in the aftermath of the mule’s death, as well as the novel’s opening scene in which the townspeople are described not only as having their bodies “occupied” by brutes, but also as having made “burning statements with questions, and killing tools out of laughs”135—which for Hurston, I would argue, is both a means of describing the lyrical quality of the town gossip and a means of engaging the unabashed meanness that attends such forms of black social life—is that the townspeople are as capable of uncompromising love as they are unabashed cruelty. The vision of these everyday folks that Hurston provides is one capacious enough to allow for both slander and loving celebration, and reflects just the sort of counter-representational ethos that guides the novel, and served as the grounds for much of the criticism surrounding it in the

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135 Ibid, 32.
moment of its publication.\textsuperscript{136}

Muleness, in this passage, operates both as a means of thinking commonality—i.e., that the experience of black women is akin to that of the actual nonhuman mules that appear in the novel, and that that alone serves as the engine of one of the text’s guiding metaphors—as well as an argument that such proximity, such vestibularity, actually lays the foundation for ethical action beyond what other actors in the scene can fathom or are willing to enact on their own. Janie’s willingness to side with the mule, to say yes to the call for ethical relation, serves not only as the condition of possibility for the free mule to become a kind of cult hero, but to simply be left alone. This letting-be which Janie makes room for allows for the free mule to die outside of the marketplace and its extractive logic, to die instead among the trees, valiant still, even in defeat. Though he must eventually go where all other brutes go, we understand from Hurston’s characterization of nonhuman animals throughout the novel that whatever a brute may be, it is certainly not a symbolic stand-in for emptiness or the absence of will. The brute, for Hurston, is not always a political actor, but it is certainly a social one.\textsuperscript{137} Hurston’s brute is no subject, nor is it germane to the genre of Man; the brute instead operates as a critique of both of these categories simultaneously, unmooring them, unmasking them as hollow positions devoid of fleshly life, what, thinking alongside Spillers, we might imagine as a kind of vestibular proximity: barred from the protections and protocols of Man, but adjacent to all other forms of life banned from that blood-stained province. Hurston is clear on the matter: within the universe of Their Eyes Were Watching God brutes are not

\textsuperscript{136} See Richard Wright. "Between laughter and tears." (1937).

\textsuperscript{137} For more on the particular distinction between the social and the political that I am calling upon here, see Stefano Harvey and Fred Moten. The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study. 2013.
socially or otherwise dead.

Thus, when the townspeople claim that death took the free mule like a natural man, it is a radical revision of the western philosophical tradition’s most pervasive ideas about death, a rebuttal to what Martin Heidegger would call the animal’s unavailability to death as such, its capacity to “perish,” but not die.\textsuperscript{138} There are resonances of a counter-Heideggerian critique in other parts of Hurston’s corpus, e.g., the first line of her famous autobiography \textit{Dust Tracks on a Road}, where Hurston writes: “Like the dead-seeming, cold rocks, I have memories that came out of the material that went to make me. Time and place have had their say.”\textsuperscript{139} Though one could read this line as merely a gesture toward the physical makeup of rocks as a form of nonhuman, ostensibly inorganic matter—or put differently, that it is in the very nature of stones to bear the trace of their formational processes, e.g., smoothness or roughness as a sign of gradual erosion over time—there is also here, implicitly, the notion that stones possess a mind, or an otherwise form of interiority. When Hurston refers to rocks as “dead-seeming,” there are not only resonances of performance, i.e., \textit{playing} dead, but also an argument about the limits of empiricism. Though the rocks in question might certainly appear to be lifeless, for Hurston, such appearances do not carry the day. In a Heideggerian register, such a claim doubles as an argument that rocks are not without access to the world, which is also to say, without a tether to experience—it is important to note here that Heidegger claims outright in his classic comparison between various forms of organic and inorganic matter that stones and plants are “without world,” that animals are “poor-in-the world,” and that

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humans “have world”\textsuperscript{140}— but rather exist on a plane that is largely opaque to human perception. In saying the free mule dies as a \textit{natural man} then, Hurston prefigures Heidegger’s argument, shutting it down in advance.

Indeed, over and against Heidegger’s vision of nonhuman life as that which is naturally given to a kind of poverty or lack, the townspeople make an argument for the free mule’s life as a full life, its death as a meaningful death. Even when they are forced to drag him to the end of the town in order to “satisfy sanitary conditions” there is, surrounding the mule, a mythos which serves to elevate him even in the midst of such inhuman—which of course operates as distinct from, but also in conversation with, \textit{nonhuman}—treatment:

Out in the swamp they made great ceremony over the mule. They mocked everything human in death. Starks led off with a great eulogy on our departed citizen, our most distinguished citizen and the grief he left behind him, and the people loved the speech. It made him more solid than building the schoolhouse had done. He stood on the distended belly of the mule for a platform and made gestures. When he stepped down, they hoisted Sam up and he talked about the mule as a school first. Then he set his hat like John Pearson and imitated his preaching. He spoke of the joys of mule-heaven to which the dear brother had departed this valley of sorrow; the mule-angels flying around; the miles of green corn and cool water, a pasture of pure bran with a river of molasses running through it; and most glorious of all, No Matt Bonner with plow lines and halters to come in and corrupt. Up there, mule-angels would have people to ride on and from his place beside the glittering throne, the dear departed brother would look down into hell and see the devil plowing Matt Bonner all day long in a hell-hot sun and laying the rawhide to his back. With that the sisters got mock-happy and shouted and had to be held up by the men folks. Everybody enjoyed themselves to the highest and then finally the mule was left to the already impatient buzzards. They were holding a great flying-meet way up over the heads of the mourners and some of the nearby trees were already peopled with the stoop-shouldered forms.\textsuperscript{141}

\textsuperscript{140} For more on Heidegger’s thinking about “having world,” see \textit{The Beginning of Metaphysical Questioning with the Question of the World. The Path Of The Investigation and Its Difficulties}, where he writes: “Man is not merely a part of the world but is also the master and servant of the world in the sense of \textit{having} world. Man has world. But then what about other beings which, like man, are also part of the world: the animals and plants, the material things like stone, for example? Are they merely parts of the world, as distinct from man who in addition \textit{has} world? [...] However crudely, certain distinctions immediately manifest themselves here. We can formulate these distinctions in the following three theses: [1.] the stone (material object) is worldless, [2.] the animal is poor-in-the-world; [3.] the man is world-forming[...]]”

What does it cost, or create, when the townspeople dare to mock everything human in death? What is the object and outcome of such derision? For Hurston, it is clear that the human component of death has much to do with a ceremony devoid of fabulation, or any gesture toward the fantastical. At the free mule’s funeral, the townspeople dare to imagine alternate worlds in which traditional taxonomies are torn asunder, worlds in which the dominant order of things is inverted and it is mules, not humans, that lay hold to social and political power. This scene of communal storying is one of the book’s most resonant instances of black feminist imagination, especially as it pertains to thinking bestial presence. As was the case in the scene in which the free mule first appeared, then Matt Bonner’s legal property still, here muleness functions not only as critical attention to the presence of nonhuman animals, and the singular gravity of their suffering, but the willingness to imagine an order of things in which those animals are no longer singular objects of violence and exploitation. Indeed, there is a radical philosophy of life being offered by those that deliver eulogies at the funeral, but there is also the very matter of their gathering, this assemblage of black persons daring to assert not only that the free mule’s life was valuable, but that he was one of their own, a citizen. This expansive vision of citizenship is akin to what Sylvia Wynter refers to as the work of the destruction and “displacement of the genre of the human of Man.”\(^\text{142}\) It is vestibular sociality: black social life at the edge.

Still, even in death, there are moments where the free mule is treated as a less-than-human entity, none more vivid perhaps than when his flesh is used as the stage upon

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which his eulogies are read. He is still left to die in the hinterlands, abandoned that the buzzards might take him when they are ready. To be sure, during the final scenes in which the free mule appears, he is not treated as a human might expect to be. One suspects that this is precisely the point. When Hurston claims that the townspeople are mocking everything human in death, included within the scope of that claim are the traditional accoutrements of the death-centered event: the casket, the grave, a church building to house the ceremony. In lieu of such adornment, the free mule’s funeral happens outside. All so that he might die where he lived. All so that he might be treated, on this final, social occasion, as an animal. Not in the sense of the animal as a site of violence or deprivation, but rather the animal as that which is given to the world, that which flourishes outside of the confines of the domestic sphere. This is the crux of the interspecies ethics that Hurston maps out for the reader, a way of being-alongside that is not rooted in reductive forms of anthropomorphism, but a desire for interconnection akin to what Édouard Glissant maps out when he writes: “for the poetics of relation assumes that to each is proposed the density (the opacity) of the other […] Relation is not a mathematics of rapport but a problematic that is always victorious over threats. To live the relation may very well be to measure its convincing fragility.” Following Glissant then, we might read the scene of the free mule’s funeral—as well as his unforeseeable inclusion into the town citizenry only paragraphs earlier—as moments that bear out the sort of fraught exchanges that constitute relation, a collision of opaque actors marked not by smooth collaboration or cohesion, but the collision itself, the very fact of their meeting.

For Glissant, relation is exemplified not by the lifelong bond or the unbreakable

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phalanx, but by strangers screaming in disparate tongues across the void. Relation is found, and freed, in the moments where it is most evasive. Relation is the labor of dragging the free mule to the hinterlands, not only that his body might be given to the earth, but also that it might be honored. Wept and laughed over. In this sense, the free mule’s funeral is the materialized intersection of a black feminist ethic of care, and Glissant’s vision of “a possible community…between mutually liberated opacities, differences, languages.”¹⁴⁴ What emerges here, as the finished result of Janie’s empathic plea earlier in the chapter, is just such a community, one cohered not by sameness, or even solidarity forged over mutual political interests, but by a liberated opacity bodied forth in everyday acts of stubbornness, foolishness, and joy.

When the townspeople eulogize the free mule, they dare to imagine a fundamentally different world than the one the free mule was made to survive. The vision of mule-heaven rendered here lays low any and all claims to human dominance and superiority, and instead offers an eschatology marked by a titanic reversal: the triumph of beast over Man, an order in which justice is meted out against those that once sought to hinder the flourishing of animal lives. That the townspeople include one of their own as the victim of this otherworldly comeuppance—though it is clear at this point in the novel that Matt Bonner is, in no uncertain terms, the least popular man in town—is central to the scene’s underlying argument. The very notion of mule-heaven is, at bottom, an acknowledgement of the various ways in which animals are exploited within the culture of the town. It is a paradise complete with amends for the past life: a front row seat to watch one’s former oppressors burn.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 44.
What’s more, there is no need for physical labor in mule-heaven. Indeed, mule-heaven functions as a utopian space precisely because of the absence of the marketplace, and the erasure of the unjust labor relations which, in the case of the mule and the sharecropper, the mule and the slave, the mule and the figure of the black, serve as both a primary site of trauma and a constitutive element of their perceived social identity. To craft the image of a universe in which muleness is not inextricably linked to extracted labor or an ongoing availability to violence is to upend the world, to rend the operative terms from the soil in which they were sown. It is also a purposeful, counter-capitalist linking of blackness and muleness, blackness and animality that runs counter even to other moments in the novel where animals are deployed as a means of illustrating the exploitative conditions of black life lived under the fist of slavery’s long duree.

Here and elsewhere, Hurston’s foremost commitment is not to cleanliness but to murk, to the dirty, difficult labor of giving language to the historically fraught proximity between black flesh and the beasts of the field. Rather than evade this adjacency, Hurston elaborates upon it, giving musculature and music to the cut, making a world from what is widely known as nothingness. Even beyond the mule’s funeral as an isolated event, the attention to animal worlds made manifest in that moment pervades the text as a whole, and provides important insight into Hurston’s investment in the mule as a figure that is necessary to think with when we consider the most radical vision of black liberation possible. For Hurston, at least as it pertains to the world of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, black feminist theorizing is a way of thinking relation, a practice of reading that hinges upon one’s willingness to pay attention to the flesh. To care for it, even and especially when that flesh is not held precious by the protocols and practices of Man.
Put differently, muleness, as it is deployed not only in the free mule’s funeral, but indeed the moments right after, compels us, always, to look where we have not been trained to look:

As soon as the crowd was out of sight they closed in circles. The near ones got nearer and the far ones got near. A circle, a swoop and a hop with spread-out wings. Close in, close in till some of the more hungry or daring perched on the carcass. They wanted to begin, but the Parson wasn’t there, so a messenger was sent to the ruler in a tree where he sat. The flock had to wait the white-headed leader, but it was hard. They jostled each other and pecked at heads in irritation. Some walked up and down the beast from head to tail, tail to head. The Parson sat motionless in a dead pine tree about two miles off. He had scented the matter as quickly as any of the rest, but decorum demanded that he sit oblivious until he was notified. Then he took off with ponderous flight and circled and lowered, circled and lowered until the others danced in joy and hunger at his approach.

He finally lit on the ground and walked around the body to see if it were really dead. Peered into its nose and mouth. Examined it well from end to end and leaped upon it and bowed, and the others danced a response. That being over, he balanced and asked:

“What killed this man?”

The chorus answered, “Bare, bare fat.” “What killed this man?”

“Bare, bare fat.”

“What killed this man?”

“Bare, bare fat.”

“Who’ll stand his funeral?” “We!!!!”

“Well, all right now.”

So he picked out the eyes in the ceremonial way and the feast went on.145

Unlike the townspeople, the buzzards do not necessarily mock everything human in death; rather they animalize what we might consider to be solely the province of the human. They create their own ceremony around the mule, and in doing so refer to him as a man, a man given to death like any other. For the buzzards, the consumption of the dead mule’s flesh is both instinct and something other than instinct. There is an order to the proceedings, a decorum that must be acknowledged and adhered to even in this moment of bloody exchange. Hurston turns our attention to the animal world in this scene that we

might grasp more fully what she has used the figure of the mule to argue all along, that the animal not only has a world, but has a world that both encompasses ours and exceeds it, a world that has space for both the funeral and the feasting upon the corpse that comes after. In this sense, the buzzards too represent a robust critique of Heidegger’s claims about animal experience. Far from world-less, they instead wear the trappings of the human world like a garment they can put on and remove at will. They are both in the world and of it; they know its workings well enough to play with its conventions and constraints, precisely because of the subjugated position they occupy. For Hurston, the proximity of this scene to the free mule’s funeral is also an argument about black humor, and the many ways that black social life—by virtue of not only its existence, but also its dogged tenacity—operates in a similar fashion. Opacity becomes an occasion for analysis, and those said to be without an interior grant, once gathered together, the briefest glimpse into the multitudes they contain.

Thus, in this final instance, the mule is again the agent through which we come to understand that animals are as proximate as they are opaque, and that it is absurd to assume, as Brian Massumi writes: “that animals do not have thought, emotion, desire, creativity, or subjectivity […] is that not to consign animals yet again to the status of automatons?”

On this front, Hurston and Massumi have their feet firmly planted on common ground. Up until the final pages of the novel, all of the animal characters in Their Eyes Were Watching God live into the kind of historically un-thought affective, intellectual complexity that Massumi gestures toward. Indeed, in the book’s closing movement, it is the animals that foretell the hurricane that will spell the end of Janie’s

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relationship with her third and truest beloved, Tea Cake:

Some rabbits scurried through the quarters going east. Some possums slunk by and their route was definite. One or two at a time, then more. By the time the people left the fields the procession was constant. Snakes, rattlesnakes began to cross the quarters. The men killed a few, but they could not be missed from the crawling horde. People stayed indoors until daylight. Several times during the night Janie heard the snort of big animals like deer. Once the muted voice of a panther. Going east and east. 147

To the end, the animals know beyond knowing. In this respect, they differ greatly from the white residents of the nearby towns, as well as Tea Cake, who claims, in what will prove to be a tragically misplaced moment of trust, “De white folks ain’t gone nowhere. Dey oughta know if it’s dangerous.” 148 Though Janie wants to heed the warning that the animals’ collective flight represents, she chooses instead to honor Tea Cake’s sense of the situation before them. And though one can certainly understand Tea Cake’s logic—that is, that in a sociopolitical landscape centrally concerned with white safety, keeping tabs on what the white citizenry deems dangerous is always a sound course of action—in the end, it is this reliance on Eurocentric ways of knowing that dooms the pair. Ultimately, Tea Cake will contract rabies from a dog he encounters in the coming flood, and Janie will be forced to shoot him in order to save her own life. That the novel ends on this note, that is, a major death caused by proximity to the animal, is of critical import. From the opening scene of Their Eyes Were Watching God, Hurston makes it clear that there is no communion to be had with the animal without the possibility of death. There is no bond unmarred by blood. This, for Hurston, is the work of the figure of the mule as a problem for thought: 149 how we might collaborate across unfathomable distance, and think about difference not as an occasion for domination, but an opportunity to sketch a dying world.

147 Ibid, 199.
anew.
White Dogs: Kinship & racial hierarchy in Salvage The Bones

Tie Luther B to that cypress. He gon’ be alright.
The dog done been rained on before,
he done been here a day or two hisself before,
and we sho’ can’t take him. Just leave him
some of that Alpo and plenty of water.
Bowls and bowls of water.
We gon’ be back home soon this thing pass over.
Luther B gon’ watch the place while we gone.
You heard the man—he said Go’ and you know
white folks don’t warn us ‘bout nothing unless
they scared too. We gon’ just wait this storm out.
Then we come on back home. Get our dog.

—Patricia Smith, “Won’t Be But a Minute”

Fact is, I trust dogs more than I trust humans.

—DMX, “Grand Champ Intro”

dog bred to smell the coke/dog bred
to smell the bomb/dog bred to smell
the nigger beneath the floorboards

—Danez Smith, “Dogs!”

White dogs—which is also to say, dogs that, as a result of those who claim
ownership over their flesh and employ it, exploit it towards white supremacist ends are
more or less inextricable from hegemonic whiteness as a set of sociopolitical protocols
and practices—are ubiquitous within the African American literary tradition and beyond.
Even a cursory search of the landscape reveals the uncanny reappearance of these
particular animal figures time and time again across genre and period alike. From
Langston Hughes’s “White Dog,” a standout in his under-theorized collection of short
stories The Ways of White Folks, to the Carl Phillips poem of the same name, to the pack
of bloodhounds that bound across the ice after Eliza in Uncle Tom’s Cabin, there are
white dogs everywhere; white dogs that are always already not only pets, but often
extensions of the police state, indeed, the very flesh and bone entities through which the
murderous whims of the police state are made manifest in the everyday lives of those
who are property themselves or else the descendants of property, those who own nothing
and as such exist as a threat to the logic of private property altogether. Given this implicit
doubleness, that is, the historical role of the dog as both dire threat and dearest
companion within the bounds of not only black expressive cultures, but the everyday
experiences of black folks forced to live at/as the bottommost portion of U.S. racial caste,
how might we devise an approach to reading the presence of dogs in African American
letters that undermines the cultural mythos, and indeed, the persistent erasure, which
allows for the common rendering of the figure of the dog as “man’s best friend”? Or,
along a slightly different vector, what if we were to linger with that particular formulation
that we might unsettle it, might bore down into the ideology that gives such a phrase
coherence in order to expose what is at stake in imagining the sort of biologically
determined, automatic kinship it implies, a bond between Man and beast ensured and
established at the level of species, the dog as a being-for-the-master from the very first,
enchained the moment it enters the scene?

If the dog is indeed always and already the closest companion of Man, then what
happens in a textual moment or social scene in which Man is jettisoned from our line of
sight, and we find ourselves in worlds, imagined or otherwise, populated by those who
live and love at the margins of the genre of Man, those altogether barred from the good
life and its illusive protections? Stated plainly, how might we work toward a theory of
black kinship, black friendship as a way of life to borrow the Foucauldian phrasing

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by paying close attention to instances throughout literatures of the African diaspora in which black folks and the dogs with whom they share space are able to complicate, and ultimately subvert, the bourgeois sensibilities which give shape and form to any strict, hierarchical relationship between pet and human master-subject. Following Fanon’s formulation that “the black is not a man,” as well as Sylvia Wynter’s claim that the work of black feminism is, from one angle, a collective laboring toward “the end of the genre of Man,” I would like to think about what kinship between humans and dogs can look like when that which ostensibly undergirds the identity of the former is something other than domination or sovereign power, that is, when Man is removed from the equation altogether, and those who have been historically barred from that very category enter the frame of study. If we can think of human-dog relationships outside of a certain, Linnaean vision of species hierarchy, and instead embrace a model akin to what Karen Barad and others might call entanglement\textsuperscript{151}, then what sort of alternative models for thinking sociality across species might become available to us? Put differently, if we are willing to militate toward the abolition of the figure and the genre of Man and think companionship anew, outside of the familiar dialectics which structure the relationship between pet and master in the first instance, what rises to the fore in the wake? What beauty? What unthinkable terror?

In the name of such a project, this chapter will focus primarily on the role of dogs in Jesmyn Ward’s 2011 National Book Award-winning novel \textit{Salvage The Bones}.

\textsuperscript{151} For more on entanglement, see Karen Barad. \textit{Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning}. Duke University Press, 2007.
Therein, I argue, we are provided with an especially rigorous foundation for thinking kinship across lines of species via the relationship between the novel’s protagonist, Esch, her brother Skeetah, and China, a white pitbull who doubles as both the family pet and the primary breadwinner in Esch and Skeetah’s home. Through this doubly defamiliarizing gesture—i.e., the positioning of the female dog as the head of the human household—as well as others, including but not limited to the recoding of dogfighting, and the underground spaces in which dogfighting tends to take place, as a site of both black social possibility and singular human-nonhuman intimacy, Ward crafts a universe in which dominant taxonomies are razed to the ground in favor of much more slippery, unregulated ways of organizing disparate forms of life. I am interested in lingering with these moments of indeterminacy towards the end of imagining, alongside Ward, a more liberating model of interspecies companionship than what is offered within the scope of contemporary animal studies discourse, as well as the western philosophical tradition more broadly.

By way of opening, I will undertake a close reading of the Carl Philips poem, “White Dog,” in an effort to see what happens when the immediate threat of violence is removed from a poem that contains all of the other elements that have heretofore been discussed as mediating factors in the relationship between black people and dogs. In the absence of the immediate, looming threat of punishment or violence, how is Philips able to render his relationship to the nonhuman? What does the poem teach us about fugitivity, and the need for black elsewheres governed by different laws, different grammars of encounter and exchange?

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From its first lines, Carl Philips’s “White Dog” provides a working vocabulary for thinking the particularity of the historical relationship between black persons and the dogs they claim as kin and companions, a relationship always already marked by both a reckoning with the utter opacity of the animal other and a willingness to relinquish even a semblance of control or dominion as a direct result of that reckoning:

First snow—I release her into it—
I know, released, she won't come back.
This is different from letting what,

already, we count as lost go. It is nothing like that. Also, it is not like wanting to learn what losing a thing we love feels like. Oh yes:

I love her.
Released, she seems for a moment as if some part of me that, almost,

I wouldn't mind understanding better, is that not love? She seems a part of me,

and then she seems entirely like what she is:
a white dog,
less white suddenly, against the snow,

who won't come back. I know that; and, knowing it, I release her. It's as if I release her because I know.152

One is left to wonder what, beyond the briefest insight we are granted here, the speaker in the poem knows, exactly. That is, what sort of knowledge allows for the loss of the beloved, nonhuman other to serve not as a moment in which one might mourn the loss of property or grieve a dearly departed friend, but an occasion to name the loss as something other than loss, a loss that is antecedent, given. The speaker is aware, and says outright in the first stanza, that there is no possibility of reunion or return here. Once set free the

white dog will remain free, and in remaining free—which is also to say, at a distance beyond the reach of human hands, human gaze, or human will—will destabilize the sort of loyalty or fealty one readily expects from it, a loyalty that is presumed at the level of biology. When the speaker claims that this scene is “nothing like” a moment in which one might let what they “count as lost go,” he is, I would like to argue, employing a gesture that can be found throughout African American letters, that is, explicitly naming the difference between letting go of what one had and lost, and letting go of what one knows they did not and never could own. Which is not to say that there is no sense of belonging present in the relationship between the eponymous white dog and the speaker as described here; instead “White Dog” models for the reader a vision of belonging without ownership, kinship over against the logic of private property.

The speaker does not release the white dog so as to learn something new about grief (also, it is not like wanting to learn what/losing a thing we love feels like), or because the depth of his commitment to care for and live alongside her has waned (Oh yes: /I love her), but rather because the will of the animal flashes before him and demands to be reckoned with as true will, as desire that must be treated ethically, rather than subsumed or repressed in the name of the presumed mastery. Normative relations are foregone altogether here in pursuit of an open relation that accounts for the dog’s deep interiority, and what’s more, what Jakob von Uexküll would call the animal’s relationship to its umwelt, its personal life-world, over and against and apart from the


\[\text{\textsuperscript{153}}\] Ibid.
speaker’s vision of the landscape, his reading of the unstable distinction between the dog and the snow made unstable not only by color but by the unwieldy nature of possession itself. Here, the dog functions as the enfleshment of the wild ostensibly made tame, a subdued, domesticated wildness disappearing into a wildness that can never be curtailed or confined. And for a moment, this wildness is also the wildness of the speaker, a part of himself he “wouldn’t mind knowing better.”

The speaker thinks to call this impulse love, and immediately thinks better of it. The gesture towards the elevation of the human emotional life against, even through, the flesh of the white dog is instead made into an object of critique here. Rather than understanding the dog as a technology through which the speaker might come to a higher plane of self-understanding, or otherwise arrive at an epiphany about his emotional universe that depends upon the dog in an abstract sense but could just as easily be cathected onto another nearby, nonhuman actor, the speaker opts for a vision of love—which in the Philips poem we might also read as a particularly black love that blurs the space between entanglement and relation, indeed that dances in the chaos produced by the caesura which could have been said to separate the two terms in in the first instance—that rejects solipsistic introspection or dominion in favor of things unknowable, things unseen. Though the speaker may feel as if the white dog is a part of him—which is distinct from a mutual entanglement and registers instead as a rendering of the animal-as-extension—and indeed experience its companionship this way in the course of their shared, quotidian experience, there is nonetheless the fact of her dogness, that returns throughout the poem to complicate and ultimately unmoor that feeling, throwing it into relief in the wake of the storm that doubles as the occasion of the dog’s refusal of such a
fiction, its preference for what lies beyond the bounds of the domestic sphere. The dog’s “release” then, works in a double-sense. Its freedom is bound up with the will of the speaker but is not reducible to it; the speaker releases the dog once it becomes clear that she is already free of him, that she has always had her own set of concerns, her own bauplan or “building plan” in Uexkullian terms, her own understanding of the “meaning carriers and meaning-factors”\(^{155}\) in the lived environment. The speaker merely recognizes this desire and chooses to honor it rather than repudiate its pull. It is the thinking that undergirds this choice, that is, the critical interpretative leap from seems to is that marks the transition from the poems fourth stanza to its fifth, that is our central concern: “and then she seems entirely like what she is/a white dog, /less white suddenly, against the snow, /who won’t come back./I know that; and, knowing it, /I release her. It's as if I release her/ because I know.” At the close of the poem, we are given an image of dogly affect, of dogness, that serves as something of a discursive intervention. For Phillips, the white dog is legible as such not because of her presumed desire for a human master, but rather the converse; it is the dog’s very distance from the whims and inner workings of the human that mark its position. What Phillips uncovers here is a decidedly asymmetrical desire; a human need for companionship marked by proximity, and often obedience, that does not originate with the dog, but emerges here as a product of a particular kind of androcentrist cosmology. The white dog herein refuses to live as a reflection of a man’s inner world and instead asserts her own, dares to relinquish her particularity (less white suddenly, against the snow) that she might enter the clearing, indulge in its endless possibility.

To be sure, the *letting-go* we see modeled in Phillips’s “White Dog”—a move which, it bears mentioning, is in the first an ethics, a necessary reckoning with the reality of material and otherwise worlds that exist beyond the province of human knowledge—is a mode of planetary thinking. It is a form of black sociality which asserts that “what love and connection the speaker holds for and with [the white dog] must be held with the knowledge that she is her own completely separate entity, free to remove herself from the speaker entirely, and not subject to human emotions” (emphasis my own).156 The speaker’s willingness to critique a vision of human love that seeks to oversimplify the sheer breadth and capacity of the dog’s life-world—which is also to say, a love that effectively imagines nonhuman animals as nonentities without interior lives worth considering—is also an unsettling of the very terms by which many have come to understand dogs as a distinct category of animal life:

[…] it does not any good composing sonnets if you are a dodo. You are obviously missing the intelligence you need to survive (in the dodo’s case, this was learning to avoid new predators such as hungry the dog is arguably the most successful animal on the planet, besides us. Dogs have spread to all corners of the world, including inside our homes, and cases onto our beds. While the majority of mammals on the planet have seen a steep decline in their populations as a result of human activity, there have never been more dogs on the planet than there are today […] I am fascinated with the kind of intelligence that has allowed dogs to be so successful. Whatever it is—this must be their genius.157

For Woods and Hare, the genius of dogs is inextricable from what we might read as an unsurpassed ability to adapt to the ways of the dominant species, to move with and alongside humankind in a way that makes their presence invaluable. What remains


altogether unchallenged in this vision of evolutionary history however, and disturbingly so, is the sleight of hand that allows for the wanton destruction of nonhuman life all over the planet to enter the frame as mere “human activity.” What lingers behind such banal, altogether bloodless phrasing are too many dead bodies too count, entire ecosystems reduced to cinders in the name of human progress and the advancement of western civilization. Further, to argue that dogs have only fared as well as they have over the centuries because of their usefulness to the human project as living actors rather than as primarily food or fuel, that they have flourished, at least at the level of population, because of what is posited here as some sort of organic inclination towards servility, is to also damn the wild, to pathologize the myriad forms of plant and animal life that have and continue to buck against human domination in ways that are and are not legible within the bounds of an anthropocentrism worldview. What also lingers throughout this passage though it remains largely unmarked, unacknowledged or else repressed, is the capacity of the dog to lie, to live in the home or lay in the bed of a human master simply as a means to its own unknowable ends. How might the worldview presented by Woods and Hare be complicated by a reading of the dog as a double agent or quiet insurgent; the dog not as an extension of a human master, but an infinitely more complex being, one with a set of desires that are largely unknowable to the human mind?

In this regard, the Philips poem serves as a useful counterpoint to the sort of widely accepted thinking about not only the long-standing social role, but also the ostensibly hard-set neurological predispositions of dogs. His is a vision of dog life without any masters worthy of the title, one in which the bauplan of his companion animal takes precedence over the world he imagined for them both. Following this
example, I would like to examine another pair of scenes in which white dogs take central stage as conduits through which we might come to understand something like a black radical vision of human-dog kinship; an approach to thinking relation that has no truck with the property logics that undergird the limiting ways in which dogs are rendered within the popular imagination and beyond.

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From the opening scenes of *Salvage The Bones*, it is clear the novel is one that will require the reader to recalibrate and revise her most basic categories, to seek out fresh, more nuanced vocabularies for the social and psychic world unfolding before us. The story begins with a white dog gone feral. Legibly unsettled, at least. Seemingly uncontrollable:

> China’s turned on herself. If I didn’t know, I would think she was trying to eat her paws. I would think that she was crazy. Which she is, in a way. Won’t let nobody touch her but Skeet. When she was a big headed pit bull puppy, she stole all the shoes in the house, all our black tennis shoes Mama bought because they hide dirt and hold up until they’re beaten soft [...] Now China is birthing puppies. 158

From this opening scene, then, we already have a sense of some of the major themes that will serve to structure the novel. Everywhere we find the language of conflict and collision; the dog, China, *turning on herself*, the image of the black shoes beaten soft by use, the birth of a litter of puppies as a kind of compensatory gesture in the wake of a long-standing debt. The first glimpse we get into the psychic life of the text’s narrator betrays an eye for metaphor and violence alike; a keen attention to the way categories fold onto and over one another and never without the potential for loss. Motherhood is the opening scene’s central object of concern, and it is absolutely essential that there is

more than one mother present when the narrative begins. In no small part because what
Ward provides the reader with here is a certain, alternative language for motherhood. To
become a mother, Ward seems to say, is also always already, in some sense, to go crazy,
to lose the sense of oneself as a single being and enter into a kind of embodied
multiplicity that challenges dominant modes of thinking an enclosed, self-contained
subjecthood.

For China to become a mother, she must lose herself, implode, and somehow
simultaneously make right the damage she did when she first entered the world.

Motherhood is inextricable from a certain proliferation of brute force, chaos deployed in
all directions. And this destruction is not at all separate from the in-breaking of life into
the world but constitutive of it. There is no new birth without destruction. No life without
a certain version of the world coming to a close:

China is licking the puppies. I’ve never seen her so gentle. I don’t know what I thought
she would do once she had them: sit on them and smother them maybe. Bit them. Turn their
skulls to bits of bone and blood. But she doesn’t do any of that. Instead she stands over
them, her on the side and Skeetah on the other like a pair of proud parents, and she
licks. 159

What becomes clear not long after this passage is that China is a fighter, Skeetah her
coach and trainer and kin, the pair of them a force to be reckoned with in the dogfights
that reign as a popular pastime in the novel’s primary setting of Bois Sauvage,

Mississippi. Bois Sauvage is, of course, French for wild wood, and it is this motif,
wildness, the constant presence of actors sentient and otherwise that cannot or will not be
tamed or made civil, that takes center stage throughout the text. Thinking with the terms
the novel’s narrator, Esch, makes readily available for us, we can immediately read a
linkage between the craziness she attributes to China and a descent from domestication

159 Ibid, 40.
into a certain wildness, a line of flight taken from the sort of discipline that has made China such a dominant force within Bois Sauvage’s community of animal prizefighters. It is China’s very identity as a fighter, however, that complicates her newfound role as a mother and caretaker for Esch, what she expects the moment the puppies come into the world is not anything legible as love or affection, but instead the kind of violence for which China is best known, a kind of unrelenting cruelty that doubles as the condition of possibility for Esch and the rest of her family to continue to live.

At the moment the reader arrives in the world of Salvage The Bones, it is China, the companion animal and new mother, that has served as the breadwinner in Esch’s household for some time. A role she entered, we are led to believe, once Esch and Skeetah’s father stops working in the wake of their mother’s unexpected death. Thus, when Esch describes Skeetah standing with China as if the two are “a pair of proud parents,” there is also a gesture, I think, towards the sort of anti-normative, distinctly wild kinship relations that have emerged in the wake of the loss of the potential for a nuclear family, the alternative possibilities that have opened up given the absence of the mother that preceded China, the woman who we are never introduced to, in fact, by any name other than Mama. It is not only the present violence of motherhood, then, that haunts the novel, but also the ghost of a mother lost, a mother that never got the chance to raise the youngest of the children in the house, Randall and Junior, and only saw the narrator, Esch, grow to be a young girl.

Mama’s absence is felt everywhere throughout the novel; the wildness we see from Esch and others is intended, in part, to be a reflection of their ostensible lack of adult guidance, what happens when the ones left in charge of the house are a teenage boy
and his dog. To Ward’s credit, this aspect of the text never transforms into a kind of cautionary tale. Quite the contrary. Though Mama’s absence is clearly the source of all sorts of interpersonal conflict and individual trauma that we see characters wrestling with throughout the novel, the difficulty of reckoning with her ghost also serves as the foundation for Esch’s connection with China, her understanding of the dog not only as a family pet, but as a comrade in a meaningful sense:

Color washes across the stick like a curtain of rain. Seconds later, there are two lines, one in each box. They are skinny twins. I look at the stick, remembering what it said on the packaging in the store. Two lines means that you are pregnant. You are pregnant. I am pregnant. I sit up and curl over my knees, rub my eyes against my kneecaps. The terrible truth of what I am flares like a dry fall fire in my stomach, eating all the fallen pine needles. There is something there.\(^\text{160}\)

Esch’s description of her pregnancy as a “terrible truth” is especially pointed here given its proximity to her description of China’s experience giving birth; the fear she feels is clearly not only that of the potential presence of a child, and thus also an entire vision of the future she did not imagine or plan for, but also what registers as a fear of becoming what she has born witness to, an animal gone mad, a subject without a center or stable ground to rely on. And it is this fear of losing control, of being given over to wildness, which pursues Esch throughout the novel. It manifests primarily as a kind of recurring, inverted personification at the level of description, entire taxonomic categories stretching until go slack, slipping into one another, forming altogether new assemblages. When describing a lover, Esch claims that “his muscles jabbered like chickens.”\(^\text{161}\) At one point, she refers to her childhood home as a “drying animal skeleton, everything inside […] was

\[^{160}\text{Ibid}, 77.\]

\[^{161}\text{Ibid}, 28.\]
evidence of living salvaged over the years.”162 In the landscape Esch paints for us, there is porousness between worlds, a kinship and commonality amongst living and nonliving things alike. Following Colin Dayan’s claim that “dogs stand in for a bridge—the bridge that joints persons to things, life to death, both in our nightmares and in our daily lives,”163 I wonder if we can think about Esch and China’s relationship as just this sort of forged connectivity across the boundary of species, a rapport beyond blood that also extends to the vast majority of person-nonperson relations that compose their shared social world. What Dayan calls a bridge is also a blurring, a marring of distinctions rooted in white supremacist anthropocentrism. For Esch already knows that there is an antecedent, forced proximity between her and China long before she discovers that she is pregnant, knows that they are both considered—at least, under the terms of civil society’s flattening optics—what I would like to think of here as low life. China, after all, is not only a dog but also a pit bull, and thus always already criminalized in advance by virtue of pervasive social stigma. And she is not only a pit bull but also a fighting dog, a double outlaw. Esch is a poor, dark-skinned black girl from a town in the Deep South named outright for its utter lack of civility, its murky depths and untame flora. What emerges from this shared exclusion from the realm of the proper, or the civil, I think, is the possibility of an altogether distinct relationship to the category of ownership itself, a robust, working vocabulary through which we might imagine the end or abolition of the practice of species hierarchy.

To think with and about low life in its many registers is to not only turn a critical eye towards the sites and non-subjects that have historically been considered unworthy of

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162 Ibid, 121.
study, but also to take seriously the various social protocols and practices that have taken 
hold at the level below which one cannot go, to immerse oneself in the infinite 
possibilities dreamt up and given flesh by the kids and beasts and broken things that have 
made a way out of no way, that have forged a kind of life underground, in the blackness 
at the bottom of the world.

To be clear, the putative lowness of low life is neither rooted in a moralist 
viewpoint, though it is certainly a gesture toward the judicial, nor necessarily a 
description of the inherent quality of the lives of those that might be said to inhabit such a 
category. Instead, the phrase is intended to operate as an ongoing critique and 
complication of life in the upper divisions of mainstream social strata—what Lauren 
Berlant and others might call the good life\textsuperscript{164}—and what’s more, as a spatial description 
of an elsewhere in which the forms of life that are repressed, subjugated, and everyday 
subdued might have room to flourish and establish a robust sociality amongst themselves, 
a commons even outside the commons, underneath it. This is the world into which Esch 
enters when she discovers that she is pregnant, and enters the larger community of 
mothers, human, nonhuman, and otherwise that serve as the central focus of Salvage The 
Bones. Dayan writes:

How can I seize on dog life in words? Dogs live on the track between the mental and the 
physical sometimes seem to tease out a near-mystical disintegration of the bounds 
between them. What would it mean to become more like a dog? How might we come up 
against life as a sensory but not sensible experience? We all experience our dogs’ 
unprecedented and peculiar attentiveness. It comes across as an exuberance borne by a full 
heart […] What does it mean to think outside our selves and with other beings? For dogs, 
thought is immersed in matter. Not sympathy or sentiment but something more acute and 
unsettling. When dogs find themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time, belonging to

\textsuperscript{164} For more on the good life as I am referring to it here, see Lauren Berlant. Cruel optimism. 
the wrong kinds of people or protecting earnestly the homes of their human companions, they gather themselves up in their flesh, and in a state of prescience and acceptance, they prepare for the time when life stops, as they slip away toward stillness. It is not that they do not know what is going to happen to them but that they know too well.  

Dayan’s description of what we might effectively think of as a kind of *becoming-alongside* is immensely useful as it pertains to sketching a full picture of the Esch describes her own internal universe, one in which she is constantly finding herself connected to China by both ineluctable violence and tenacious love. It is this bond that compels Esch to move from the strictly sensible into the *sensory*, to gather herself up in her flesh and enter a more full, and often dangerous, relationship with the broader social world. At several points, China’s fearlessness becomes Esch’s, indeed, it becomes clear that the sort of unquenchable, inviolable fierceness that drives China as a fighter is altogether inextricable from the way we see Esch move throughout the social milieu of Bois Sauvage. One gets the sense that Esch *feels everything*; that there is no detail of the lived environment—or the inner lives of her fellow characters—that is not readily available to her capacious vision, her razor wit. Esch is quiet, yes, but there is always a tempest lurking beyond the veil, a rage repressed but never quenched. This willingness to linger with a black girl’s fury—which is also to say, an anger that is nothing if not the desire to live over and against a psychic and political order sharply oriented against the expression or cultivation of such desire—to render it as a sign of resistance rather than mark of pathology or dysfunction, is part of what distinguishes *Salvage The Bones* as a text of great importance in terms of how we might wok toward a theory of black feeling in the contemporary moment. How we might return to the wild as a means through which to abolish the stranglehold of a white supremacist imaginary—wherein, it bears noting, a

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vision of civility is championed that is always already contradictory in the first instance given the history and present effects of settler colonialism—turning anti-black pathology on its head via a refusal that is also critical embrace, a recoding of terms that makes the space of the beast, the animal, the savage or barely salvaged a space that we might inhabit with joy. Here is where we see in action a working lexicon for sociality outside the bounds of the civil, how everyday people live and die at the underside of modernity.

Thus, the connection between China and Esch is made manifest not only in slippages between the human-nonhuman realm at the level of description, or in the ways in which both help us to re-imagine the distinction between tenderness and aggression, but also in the individual relationships between China, Esch and their respective sexual partners: Manny and Kilo. In a scene that serves as a critical point of insight into the gender politics of the novel—which is also to say, the various ways in which species hierarchy enters the world of the text by another name—we are granted both access into Manny’s own, deeply sexist ways of thinking about the relationship between sex and strength, as well as a compelling counterpoint from Skeetah:

“All dog that give birth like that is less strong after. Even if you don’t think it. Price of being female.” Finally Manny glances at me. It slides over me like I’m glass. Skeetah laughs. It sounds as if it’s hacking it’s way out of him. “You serious? That’s when they come into they strength. They got something to protect.” He glances at me, too, but I feel it even after he looks away. “That’s power.”

In opposition to Manny’s absurd, cruel schema, Skeetah argues here that motherhood is the site of a kind of strength that—unlike a legibly patriarchal or capitalist form of power—is given charge not by the freedom to dominate land, or women, or labor, but rather by the call of the other, the call to relation. It is the arrival of the child in the world

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that inaugurates this singular strength, this strength that is so often called, as Manny makes plain, weakness or loss. Skeetah’s reversal, his marking of the figure of the mother as also the site of a strength that cannot be readily accessed otherwise, cannot be tapped outside of the mother-child relation, is a moment of refusal which doubles as an occasion in which Ward is showing us how to read the novel, how to trace the thread of the mother as both protector and agent of wide-scale, destruction. For Ward, the coming-into-strength Skeetah invokes often carries with it tremendous consequences, more often than not the proliferation of unexpected casualties, bodies left broken in the wake of a mother’s rage.

Though this is most readily visible as it pertains to the personification of Hurricane Katrina towards the novel’s conclusion, it becomes clear at various points that China too is more often than not operating from a position in which her reasons for deploying certain kinds of hostility, though they might be explicable to the reader, certainly don’t read according to any neat anthropomorphism that might endear us to China as a character. There are a pair of scenes, for instance, wherein she attacks her own puppies; though the first, Skeetah explains, is a moment in which China is trying to keep the rest of her litter safe from one of their siblings that has been infected with parvovirus, the second moment, in which she mauls the puppy that most clearly resembles his father, Kilo, remains more or less opaque. Skeetah states it plainly, even throwing in a bit of end rhyme for emphasis: “We savages up here on the Pit. Even the gnats. Mosquitoes so big they look like bats.”167 This moment of self-naming, this critical embrace of savagery, is one of the novel’s greatest gifts. In Bois Sauvage, and in the Pit in particular, where China fights and trains and eventually gives birth, there is a relationship to and with

167 Ibid, 194.
violence that has absolutely no truck with the structure and everyday workings of civil society. Savagery is the way of the Pit, and that does not only mean that certain forms of violence are permissible. But rather, that this thing called violence is blurred, transformed, and ultimately reflected in the world of Bois Sauvage in ways that structure the intimate relationships between the text’s central characters. There is no place in the text untouched by the brutality that surrounds this community, the violence that shapes everyday life at the world’s bladed edge.

Manny’s cruelty to Esch in particular is a regular point of reference throughout the novel, and it is the combination of this unerring meanness and his direct, ongoing and unfounded criticism of China, that establishes a clear parallelism between him and Esch on one end of the analogy, and China and Kilo on the other; yet another fraught entanglement forged in conflict and terrifying imbalance:

Rico is Manny’s cousin, the boy from Germaine who bought his dog, Kilo to mate with China. Rico’s big red muscle of a dog with a killing jaw. It was Manny who talked up Kilo to Skeetah [...] Manny would talk shit whenever we were all out under the trees as if he could lessen the wonder of Skeetah’s prized dog. He thought he could dim her, that he could convince us she wasn’t white and beautiful and gorgeous as a magnolia on the trash-strewn hardscrabble Pit, where everything else is starving, fighting, struggling […] When they mated, China had let Kilo lick her from behind, let him mount. Smiled like she liked it [...] Kilo had placed his big mouth on her neck like he was kissing her and slobbered on her. She snapped at him, figured it for a hold. Hated the submission of it. She nicked him, snapped at him until she threw him off. She’s drawn blood, he hadn’t.

Ward’s depiction of the moment in which Kilo and China encounter one another lays bare the inherent, myriad violences that produce the plot’s point of origin, the terror that serves as the conditions of possibility for China to become a mother. We are not spared a detail. We find out that Kilo’s “killing jaw” was, in some sense, a selling point. That, of course, and China’s notorious hunger for blood beyond even the demands of competition,

168 Ibid, 191.
a fury well known throughout the dogfighting circuit she and Skeetah ran through in the moments leading up to this one. And yet it is something more than bloodlust that we are compelled to see in this scene, something more even than the muscle memory Esch alludes to towards the close of the passage. China’s refusal to heel or be held by anyone except for Skeetah is a reflection of their particular bond, one that exceeds mastery or metonymy. For China is indeed a part of Skeetah, as she is a part of Esch, though in ways that complicate any easy, straightforward vision of human dominion or doggish servility. Given Skeetah’s earlier definition of what makes the denizens of the Pit especially “savage,” we know that it is a designation that travels across species—even the gnats and mosquitoes are larger than life, mutated beyond clear taxonomic boundary—it is apparent that we are meant to read China as not so different from Skeetah or Big Henry or Randall or Junior or even Esch in terms of her everyday experiences of violence and intimacy as twin edges of the same blade.

The primary distinction that emerges to mark China is the shimmering whiteness of her fur, and even this is thrown into relief, in a sense, by other descriptions of her that abound throughout the book. Put differently, as a result of her position as a white dog ontologically blackened by her breed—and here, I am indebted to the work of not only Dayan, but popular writers such as Malcolm Gladwell who have written publicly about the ways in which pit bulls and pit bull crosses have become the objects of state repression as a result of their association with poor, largely nonwhite U.S. American populations\textsuperscript{169}—but also her place within a larger kinship network made up almost entirely of poor black folks, we are compelled to rethink the metonymic labor of

whiteness in the text, to consider the other ways in which China’s whiteness might be working at the level of device. Her name is as fitting a place as any to begin. Though there is the surface reading which draws a one-to-one connection between the whiteness of China’s fur and the whiteness of a set of fine china dishes and stops there, there are also any number of other readings available given the ways the various ways that China is characterized by Esch, as well as the specific scenarios in which her phenotypical whiteness is mentioned. Keeping with the coupling of China the dog and fine china, we can perhaps read her name in the first instance as a gesture toward delicacy or refinement, gentility over and against the harsh surroundings from which Skeetah and Esch have emerged. To come from Bois Sauvage, and what’s more, to live and work in the Pit, and yet and still name one’s dog China is to assert a certain kind of beauty where there is said to be none, a savage beauty that is not as easily breakable as fine china though it may bear its trace.

In this vein, we might also read the name China as a marker of smoothness, a testament to the way she moves in every fight, fur and skin so smooth no other dog can touch her, much less get a hold going that will do any real damage. To be china is to be precious, well-kept and cared for. And it is in this register that I think we find the most important component of China’s name at the symbolic level, that is, the mutual adoration between her and Skeetah, who does not refer to himself nor is referred to as her owner, but regularly mentions her as his teammate and collaborator, his nonhuman companion he cherishes and trains alongside: “I wonder if he has trained her to do this, to stand at his side, to not dirty even her haunches with sitting so that they gleam. China is white as the sand that will become a pearl, Skeetah is 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.”

The love Esch invokes here is one that destabilizes kind and kin and color in one fell swoop; Skeetah’s dark oyster and China’s ashen pearl rendered almost altogether indistinct by the smooth blur of their relation. China’s whiteness is representative, I think, of both what Derrida might call “the infinite distance of the other” as well as a Motenian vision of blackness in which blackness “claims” those who are not necessarily legible as members of the African diaspora—or even and especially, I would argue, the category of the human—but nonetheless are marked and marred by their condemnable proximity to black people, black locales. Thusly, we might read China as an example par excellence of the ways in which blackness destabilizes the very practice of taxonomic distinction, a dog that is optically white but indubitably black as a result of her daily participation in black social and public life, as well as her ongoing companionship with Skeetah. Her chromatic whiteness functions then, we might imagine, not as a corollary to racial whiteness, but along an altogether different symbolic vector. When Esch compares China to a magnolia blossom, or sand, it is an attempt to insert her into a broader ecopoetics that asserts vitality where it is not readily visible, to praise the starkness of her bright white coat the way one might praise a star, only visible against the blackness which serves as its condition of perceptibility. Indeed, when one pivots from Esch’s description of China’s chromatic whiteness to Skeetah’s—and this is no small

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170 Ibid, 324.


matter in part because we are led to assume that it is Skeetah who named China in the first place—during the course of a fight, we arrive at a rather striking litany of descriptors, none of which re-inscribe what we might think of as a color theory delimited by the restrictions of a white supremacist imaginary:

_China White_, he breathes, _my China. Like bleach, China, hitting and turning them red and white, China. Like coca, China, so hard they breathe you up and they nose bleed, China. Make them runny, China, make them insides outsides, China, make them think they snorted the razor, China. Leave them shaking, China, make them love you, China, make them need you, China, make them know even though they want to they can’t live without you, China, My China, he mumbles, make them know, make them know, make them know.

China’s name, and her coloration by extension, seems to signify a distinctly low sensibility and set of affects: intoxication, addiction, indiscernibility. China is a force that obscures, rearranging every border and boundary, blurring inside and outside, pleasure and pain, life and death. And it is this indeterminacy, bodied forth in the form of a song crafted by her closest companion that gives charge to China’s color as a useful metonym for thinking otherwise than what we might normally ascribe to whiteness. Here, rather than imagining her coat as a gesture toward property or dominion in contrast to the wildness of Bois Sauvage, the irreducible, irredeemable blackness of its inhabitants and all that they touch, we can instead read China’s whiteness as a site of intoxication and excess, her whiteness as always already blackened, as a “dark white” even, to use Samuel Beckett’s phrasing. Through China’s flesh, and the proximity to blackness she enacts in her everyday movement throughout the world of the Pit and beyond, whiteness and blackness as semiotic markers are muddled, thrown into chaos. China must _make them know_ who she is, make them know her strength, her ferocity and skill, because of

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the supposed distance between what her flesh signifies and the world she inhabits, the 
shine of her coat and the dirt and grime from which she emerges.

In truth, it is the dirt and the grime that creates the bond beyond blood which 
sutures Kilo and China and Esch and Manny, this spatial and ontological proximity that 
tethers their futures together. And not only their futures, we come to find, but all those 
who choose the life that Skeetah and China have chosen, life at the edge of the life, to use 
Dayan’s term, sociality beyond the borders of the civil:

They will all match today, one dog against another. 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, to be able 
to say, My bitch did it or My nigga got him. Some of the boys are nervous; they put their hands 
in their pockets, take them out, swing their sweat rags in the air and swat at gnats. Some of the 
boys are confident: shoulders round and grinning […] a hawk circles in the air above us, 
turns, vanishes. 175

Here, in the clearing, the relentless forms of restriction that govern the lives of these boys 
are altogether cast aside, eschewed in favor of a worldview wherein the boundaries 
between forms of life come crashing down. Again, the savage appears here not as a 
marker of derision or worthlessness, but as a modality defined by a certain courage, and 
tenacity. The savage heart is that which flourishes in the midst of the unlivable, which 
persists over and against an entire structure set up against them from the very start. In a 
difficult, almost perverse turn, we come to see that the violence these boys expose their 
companion animals to is the same violence they experience every day. Again: it is the 
commonplace nature of this brutality—not only its frequency, but that it is held in 
common—that makes all the difference. A violence that extends even beyond the human-
dog relationships in the novel as structured within the bounds of the fight itself, and into

the language that serves as the condition of emergence for what we might think of, following Giorgio Agamben, as relation without rank. In such a space, Esch’s repetition of my bitch did it and my nigga got him is not only a clear instance of a certain kind of black vernacular repurposing—wherein phrases traditionally used as gendered and racialized epithets becomes terms of both endearment and empowerment—but also of a desire to think kinship across the human and animal realms rooted in familiarity, and a sense of pride. Such reversals are commonplace throughout Salvage The Bones, and reflect Ward’s commitment to creating a narrative landscape in which no categories remain stagnant, or pure; everything here moves, everything warps and loses its mooring.

The big fight the boys have gathered to see is between Kilo and Boss, but it is the final fight of the novel, a match between Kilo and China, that ends up taking up more real estate than any other in the text, an exchange which ends in the only moment of internal dialogue we get from any of the animal characters:

She 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. She 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.

Here, Skeetah’s chant appears to us anew, given fresh life by China’s tenacity. In this final fight, the knowledge China offers to all those looking on is also a kind of counter-knowledge, an infusing of the sign of the mother with a certain destructive force and

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177 Ibid, 351.
brute strength. In the small piece of internal monologue we bear witness to, she addresses Kilo as *father* in a way that signals everything but kinship, and actually serves to distance him as an object of empathy or affection. Kilo’s relationship to China, let her tell it, extends as far as his contribution of genetic material—the traits for which he was selected as a breeding partner—and goes no further. She has no milk for him, no compassion or care; only fire, only the strength of her neck and the cut of her white teeth. This image of the figure of the mother as a source of great terror, indeed, the mother as destroyer or unstoppable force, is not limited to China. By the novel’s end, when Hurricane Katrina has ravaged the land and there is barely a home standing in Bois Sauvage, Esch will not only refer to the storm as “the mother that swept into the Gulf and slaughtered,”¹⁷⁸ but also, later on, as “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”¹⁷⁹ and, finally, as “the mother we will remember until the next mother with large, merciless hands, committed to blood, comes.”¹⁸⁰ In *Salvage The Bones*, motherhood is a category that is open to both the nonhuman and the nonliving. Esch’s aforementioned mother, who, again, is referred to only as *Mama* throughout the text, appears primarily as a phantom, never speaking, animate only in the brief flashbacks Esch provides.

Nonetheless, it is this constellation of mothers—Katrina, Mama, China and Esch—each inhabiting a different position in a normative hierarchy of biological life, that teach us how to read *Salvage The Bones* for signs of joy, and vitality, where some might

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, 506.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid, 506.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, 507.
see only blight, a great land laid to waste. For it is in the wake of Katrina’s great destruction, when the debris has smashed its collective head into the homes of the dispossessed, countless shards of glass glinting like dewdrops against the dead wet earth, that we encounter a truly breathtaking moment of black sociality somehow breaking through: “Christophe and Joshua’s porch was missing, and part of their roof. A tree had smashed into Mudda Ma’am and Tilda’s house. And just as the houses clustered, there were people in the street, barefoot, half naked, walking around felled trees, crumpled trampolines, talking with each other, shaking their heads, repeating one word over and over again: alive alive alive alive.”¹⁸¹ Even after the end of the world, then, we find that there is still an occasion for gathering. Over and against a philosophy of bare life or social and civic death that might name these men and women and children and animals already long gone, there is a refusal bodied forth in the very act of speaking one to another, of returning repeatedly to that which is supposedly farthest from their reach: a life worth recognizing as such. The Katrina survivors of Bois Sauvage go as far as to turn their refusal to die into a kind of spell, a song that speaks life where it simply cannot be, futurity where all available metrics signal finitude. Just as Esch calls us to see China as her sister in the novel’s final pages,¹⁸² the black poor of Bois Sauvage demand that we think of life and death, abundance and utter lack, not as clearly demarcated antipodes, but as altogether inextricable, death, to invert the Nietzschean formulation, as a species of life.¹⁸³ For the denizens of the Pit—not unlike those who inhabit the Muck,¹⁸⁴ the

¹⁸¹ Ibid, 480.

¹⁸² Ibid, 513.

Clearing, the Bottom, and countless other spaces in and through which the historically marginalized have forged imposed nothingness into a kind of living—there is a flourishing that exceeds the reach and restrictions of modern political economy. There is a world beneath the world. And it shimmers.


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Biography

Joshua Bennett hails from Yonkers, NY. Winner of the 2015 National Poetry Series, he has received fellowships from the Hurston/Wright Foundation, the Josephine de Karman Fellowship Trust, The Center for the Study of Social Difference at Columbia University, and the Ford Foundation. He has recited his original work at events such as The Sundance Film Festival, The Clinton Global Citizen Awards, The NAACP Image Awards, and President Obama's Evening of Poetry and Music at the White House. His poems have been published, or are forthcoming, in Beloit Poetry Journal, Boston Review, Callaloo, and the Kenyon Review. Penguin Books will publish his debut collection of poetry, The Sobbing School, in September 2016.

Bennett holds an M.A. in Theatre and Performance Studies from the University of Warwick, where he was a Marshall Scholar. In 2010, he delivered the Commencement Address at the University of Pennsylvania, from which he graduated with the distinctions of Phi Beta Kappa and magna cum laude.