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“WHERE DID WE GO FROM THERE?”: *BEASTS OF THE SOUTHERN WILD*'S RESISTANCE TO CIVIL LIFE

After 50 years from the passing of the Civil Rights (1964) and Voting Right Acts (1965), which pulled down the last limitations on blacks' access to the American civil life, contemporary African American studies still question the effects of those battles and achievements. Scholars such as Salamishah Tillet, for example, analyze the discrepancies between the civil rights implementation and the civic estrangement African Americans even now suffer, which *de facto* show the acts of the 1960s as incomplete. Tillet describes today's civic estrangement as “a form of an ongoing racial inequality,” because it highlights African Americans' legal status as citizens but their simultaneous under-representation as civic members – in the forms of civic memory, for example – of American society (3).¹ Much of the contemporary scholarship on African American studies follows Tillet's line, focusing on questions of citizenship, representation, and the very partial status of black subjects in the United States due, among others, to the imprint of slavery and its social and economic consequences.

Contrary to this emphasis on the necessity to bridge the gap between legal citizenship and civic participation, the film at the center of this study, *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012), casts doubts on the importance of civic belonging as a rewarding act in one's life. At the beginning of the new millennium, in years that are defined as post-civil rights as well as post-racial, *Beasts of the Southern Wild* shows the oppressive force of civil life and the state, which transforms rights into abuse of personal choices and lifestyle. By knotting the question of civic participation with other themes such as ecology and poverty, the film complicates the notion of civic participation and estrangement, asking its viewers to consider whether marginalization can be a choice in our society.

Beasts of the Southern Wild is an oneiric and magic realist film that premiered at the 2012 Sundance film Festival, where it was praised by both public and critics. Directed by Benh Zeitlin and adapted from a drama by Lucy Alibar, entitled *Juicy and Delicious* (2012), the title of the film comes from a collection of short stories by Doris Bettis (*Beasts of the Southern Wild and Other Stories* 1973), whose title is taken from a verse of William Blake's poem “The Little Black Boy” (from the collection *Songs of Innocence*, 1789).² The reference to the “southern wild” in Blake's poem is transformed in Zeitlin's film into the south of the United States, and more precisely into Bathtub, an isolated community on the delta of the Mississippi, separated from the closest civilized community by a levee. Here live Hushpuppy, a six-year-old African American girl, and her father Wink, together with a number of white and black people.

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¹ In the words of Tillet, “While legal citizenship includes suffrage and the right to participate in government, civic membership predicates itself on abstract signs and symbols or the civic myths of the nation. In the case of African Americans, civic estrangement occurs because they have been marginalized or underrepresented in the civic myths, monuments, narratives, icons, creeds, and images of the past that constitute, reproduce, and promote an American national identity. Civic estrangement is both ascriptive and affective. As a form of an ongoing racial inequality, civic estrangement describes the paradox post-civil rights African Americans experience as simultaneous citizens and ‘non-citizens,’ who experience the feelings of disillusionment and melancholia of non-belonging and a yearning for civic membership” (3).

² “My mother bore me in the southern wild,/And I am black, but O! my soul is white;/White as an angel is the English child:/But I am black as if bereav'd of light.”



Fig. 1: Wink and his daughter Hushpuppy

The film can be described as a bildungsroman: Hushpuppy has to face two episodes which will forever change her life, that is, the storm that destroys the community where she lives, and the simultaneous death of her father. She has to learn to get by in a collapsing world and to confront her fears, which are visualized in the film in the form of the aurochs, mythological animals similar to gigantic boars.

The sense of place and the life on the delta of the Mississippi emerge as central in the film, so much so that *Beasts of the Southern Wild* has been read as an anthropological instant depicting a community which is dissolving because of changed environmental conditions. For this reason, the film has been compared to Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), a movie that narrates the last moments of a Gullah community on St. Helena, an island off the South Carolina-Georgia coast.³ For its mystical and magic qualities, it has also been compared to Terrence Malick's *Tree of Life* (Scott), for its ability to achieve "the sense of a very specific time and place encapsulating the whole of life" (Denby), while the strong role played by the female child protagonist Hushpuppy has encouraged the connection to *The Whale Rider* (Rich).

This focus on a very specific environment, together with the magic-realist tone of the film and the universal themes it touches —such as the death of one's father, the feeling of loss, and in general the attempt at maintaining a certain identitarian cohesion despite personal and natural disintegration—, partly distance the viewer from a political reading of the film. The title itself may push towards that approach, as if the reference to "beasts" and "wild" implied an absence of civilization that justifies an a-political approach to the visual text. What is more, the swamp, where Bathtub is located, is used as a variation of what nature has traditionally symbolized in American literature and culture, from Transcendentalism to Huck Finn and beyond, and its sometimes facile vision as a place of freedom against civilization.

However, despite such a simplistic reading of the role the swamp has, in line with the southern tradition life in the bayou represents an alternative to the dominant culture and a place of resistance to cultural and economic domination.⁴ In *Beasts of the Southern Wild* the clash between nature and civilization — understood as a form of control opposite to ideals of liberty— is not presented as a simple erotization of the primitive, as bell hooks's reading of the film maintains. It is, rather, a political positioning which talks of Bathtub's inhabitants' awareness both of their class as underprivileged and underrepresented, and of the dangers of what civilization can bring in terms of ecological balance and self-definition. In other words, the protagonists' life at the margin of society and their resistance to domestication and civilization come from a bitter distrust for what civil life can offer in terms of individuality, freedom, institutions and economic system. As Hushpuppy describes in voiceover, the dam, which separates Bathtub from any other human settlement, is a "wall that cuts us out" of both positive but, especially, negative aspects of civil life.

³ As Ruby Rich affirms, "Zeitlin's film resonated uncannily with Julie Dash's now-classic *Daughters of the Dust*, which premiered at Sundance in 1991 and returned in 2012 after a fine UCLA restoration. It remains a magical production that, like newcomer *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, conjures up a watery universe haunted by the past and threatened by the outside world. Equally poetic and visually original."

⁴ This is especially so in Southern literature for the role the swamp had in maroonage. See Tynes Cowan's *The Slave in the Swamp: Disrupting the Plantation Narrative* (2005) and Anthony Wilson's *Shadow and Shelter: The Swamp in Southern Culture* (2006).



To better explain how the film is politically informed, implicitly denouncing what civilization can offer and the dissimilarities it implies, I will focus here on two episodes: the first is the question of flooding and the bombing of the levee, which can be read as a response to the debate emerged around Katrina and New Orleans' black citizens' behavior; the second is what happens in the shelter, when Bathtub survivors are 'rescued' by governmental authorities: here we see the violence of the state, which practices forced removal, forced modification of bodies and forced treatment as well.

In the scenes depicting the day after the storm, the film visually recalls the tragic events of hurricane Katrina, a natural disaster that made its landfall on New Orleans and southeast Louisiana in August 2005, causing deaths and destruction especially among black Americans (Lavelle).⁵ Documentaries, reportages, and articles on the event (think of Tia Lessin and Carl Deal's *Trouble the Water*, 2008, or Spike Lee's *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts*, 2006) unambiguously showed to the nation and to the world the racial divides still existing in the United States, especially when the question of race is summoned to questions of poverty. The circulating images of deaths and destruction shed light on the indigence of large parts of the black population of New Orleans and evidenced how tormented the relationship among state, race, and class still is in the United States and especially in New Orleans and its area (Lavelle). As Kristen Lavelle reports, many (white) commentators even laid "blame on residents' character or intelligence for not abiding by the mandatory evacuation notice," whereas many just weren't able to evacuate for lacking the means to do so.

Similar to the real event, the film shows what researchers of environmental studies have proved, that is, "that low-income minority communities bear a disproportionate share of environmental hazards in our society" (Elliott and Pais). In this sense, the movie links the question of race and exclusion from society to matters of class, thus visualizing the clash between nature and civilization as something more complex than just an erotization of the natural. However, instead of the inability to leave, as was the case with the tragedy of Katrina, Zeitlin's film talks of the will to stay. Bathtub inhabitants survive the flood and react to an environmental disaster that is due to a human bad management of the territory they occupy. After the storm and the flooding, life in Bathtub is in danger because the dam stops free circulation of water. The levee causes the stagnation of water and the consequent death of the animal, plant, and human life of the swamp and, consequently, of the whole community of Bathtub. Its inhabitants, therefore, react against the unfavorable conditions that endanger the life of their community by bombing the dam, the symbol of the separation between civil life, regulated by the state, and the swamp, where they have decided to live. Their act can be read, then, as political, such violence being the only form of dialogue Bathtub's inhabitants can resort to in a democracy which does not listen to them.

With the collapse of the dam the swamp's inhabitants save their environment, but at the same time expose themselves to the arrival of institutions, whose duty is to 'rescue' the flooded people. Obligated to leave their houses despite themselves and hosted in a public shelter, Bathtub's inhabitants live this attempt at helping them of help as a violent act which modifies who they are, so much so that we hardly recognize them once in the shelter. When they are forced to leave Bathtub, Hushpuppy comments in voiceover and with the innocence of a child that, even though the shelter "didn't look like a prison," it "looked like a fish tank with no water. They said we were here for our own good," despite the sense of loss it causes in them.

The passage to civilized life, in fact, has deadly consequences on Wink: used to the extreme environmental conditions of the place where he lives, Hushpuppy's dad is not worried about the storm, which he meets with bravado; what he hardly survives is the 'civilizing' intervention in his life, which *de facto* accelerates the man's death by forcing him to take pills and cures he rejects.

While the father is forcedly medicalized, Hushpuppy is transformed into an example of mainstream femininity: her hair is combed and they make her wear a dress and shoes that mark a clear visual contrast against the image we have of her at the beginning of the film, when she was presented with her afro, shorts

⁵ "When Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast on August 29, 2005 with winds of 145 miles/hour, it damaged an estimated 90,000 square miles of housing throughout southern Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. After the storm passed, news sources placed the total number of evacuees, or 'internally displaced persons,' at approximately one million, with nearly half coming from the city of New Orleans, which remained under full mandatory evacuation for weeks following the storm due to failed levee systems and subsequent flooding" (Elliott and Pais).



and boots, freely roaming the swamps of Bathtub. Wink, in his raising of the child, privileges gendered attitudes more in line with ideas of masculinity. Conscious of his imminent death, which he hides to his daughter, he tries to model her character demanding physical strength and emotional control. When she is being taught how to eat crabs with a knife and fork, for example, Wink opposes and asks his daughter to break the crabs' shell with her bare hands, thus highlighting the necessity of physical power to survive the swamp. Or, once Hushpuppy is tearful because she realizes her father's illness, he starts a competition of sort with his daughter, asking who is the man of the house and forcing Hushpuppy to answer "I'm the man" and to show her straightened biceps. These examples invite us to interpret Wink's acts as the consequence of a lonely parent's ideas about what he considers necessary attributes for survival in the swamp: without a familial net that may support Hushpuppy in her future, his daughter has to prove she is strong enough to stay and live in that community. Hushpuppy's passage from a gendered identity more in line with mainstream ideas of masculinity (when she is in Bathtub with her father), to one that is clearly feminine in traditional terms (when she is in the shelter), is telling of the normative impact civilization has on identities. Hushpuppy's forced transformation implies that a certain type of femininity is taken for granted and naturally applied to a female body. In this line, Wink's upbringing of Hushpuppy is seen as deviant, as it denies Hushpuppy an idea of femininity which should be naturally hers. However, it does not consider the environmental conditions where Hushpuppy lives, which neutralize the benefits of mainstream femininity. As a matter of fact, life in the swamp requires force and behaviors that are usually attributed to traditional ideas of masculinity.

Such scenes urge the viewer to reflect on the problematic relationship with human beings and mainstream civil life, which is unable, in this case, to guarantee freedom and respect: on the contrary, the shelter becomes a sort of prison from where Bathtub's community cannot but try to escape to maintain its sense of self. The modification of bodies and behaviors they are subjected once 'rescued' talks of imposition and enforcement rather than salvation. The reading of those subjects as needy repeats what happened with the Katrina evacuated people. Lavelle recalls and interprets Barbara Bush's words in that occasion:

At a trip to a Houston arena shelter, Barbara Bush, the elder president Bush's wife, made a comment that reflected a lack of empathy for the hardest-hit hurricane victims and the stark social distance separating whites from blacks generally: "So many of the people in the arena here, you know, were underprivileged anyway, so this—this (she chuckles slightly) is working very well for them." Some out-of-touch whites convinced themselves that the poor, black evacuees, without even resources to afford a hotel room, were *better off* after the hurricane than before. This kind of flippant reaction to suffering by thousands reveals the deeper dynamic of *alienating* racist relations, where racist notions have for centuries impeded empathy, understanding, and solidarity across the great American color line.

This attitude is repeated at the shelter in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*: Bathtub's inhabitants' escape from the refuge is incomprehensible, because it implies the rejection of forms of civilization which are generally thought of as better than the 'primitive' lifestyle experienced in Bathtub.

The film thus comments on the problematic relationship between the state and its citizens, especially when they are black or underprivileged, and urges us to consider the violence perpetrated by the central authority on its margins, a kind of violence that is sometimes masked as social help. These transformations Bathtub's inhabitants are subjected to once in the shelter don't consider one's own will but are generated by a mainstream rationale that is both racist and useless in Bathtub. Rather than a "conservative agenda," as in bell hooks's opinion, in my reading the movie advances complex questions about the possible benefits civil life can provide and raises other doubts: when does 'civil' become something negative? What is the limit between the right to be part of a civil community and the right to be outside that civil life? Is it possible to claim one's own rights outside civil representation? Bathtub's community is not "subject to (...) romanticization as a modern primitive" (hooks); they are not examples of the *bonne sauvage* still living in a southern pastoral or in a primordial wilderness. They are conscious of the marginal position they occupy with respect to the mainstream society, and that the life of Bathtub depends on wider—and often complex, distant, and therefore unclear—interests managed by profit and human exploitation of the environment. The rejection of civil life, as it is depicted in this film, is not only due to a condition imposed to those living at the



margins, but a safer and claimed choice: life outside *civitas* is not the prelude to social death, but a preferred condition that enables an alternative social life. *Beasts of the Southern Wild* shows how damaging imposed civil standards can be for pockets of poverty which, once forced to enter a system they do not know or do not want, are deprived of their reference points. Although they already live at the margin of society, the recovery at the shelter imposes Bathub's inhabitants an even more alienating form of marginalization, which becomes forced normalization and has a devastating effect on their autonomous sense of self. The state's humanitarian intervention is but a form of its necropolitics.⁶

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⁶ For a critical reading of humanitarian intervention, see Makau Mutua "Savages, Victims, and Saviors: The Metaphor of Human Rights," *Harvard International Law Journal* 42.1 (2001): 201-45. For the idea of necropolitics, see Mbembe.