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## Environmental Innocence and Slow Violence

Natalia Cecire

“Any day now,” says the teacher in Benh Zeitlin’s 2012 film, *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, “fabric of the universe is coming unraveled. Ice caps gonna melt, water’s gonna rise, and everything south of the levee is going under. Y’all better learn how to survive now.” The film poses a nearly unthinkable, yet all too present, question: how does one prepare a small child for a future marked by imminent environmental collapse? The scene of impossible pedagogy stages the paradoxical relation between the child, so widely theorized as the sign of futurity, and her place at what Bill McKibben has called “the end of nature” (Edelman 2004; Stockton 2009; Sheldon 2013; McKibben 1989). In this essay, I wish to suggest that *innocence*, as a temporal structure and as a form of absence, deeply informs environmental representation, causing it to make special claims on the figure of the child. I am especially concerned to illuminate the negative or nonpresent dimensions of innocence and their affordances for the psychic apprehension of environmental harm. As Anne-Lise François has observed, the privileged environmental figure is precisely one of *nonimpact*, of leaving no trace—a figure of environmental innocence bound up in Romantic childhood that the literature of environmental advocacy works to disallow, asserting instead, and in the face of what François has identified as nature’s “withheld response” to violence, a call to responsibility (2014, 6). Environmental genres work to expose environmental innocence—a nonculpable earliness or having-time—as a fiction to be strongly countered by a sense of urgency (in reality, we’re out of time). Building on Robin Bernstein’s analysis of “racial innocence,” I suggest that such efforts rest on racialized temporalities of both anticipation (not-yet) and foreclosure (already-

over). Environmental innocence plays out against a long-standing shadow drama of specifically environmental black culpability seated in the figure of the black child. I am especially concerned to illuminate the negative or nonpresent dimensions of innocence and their affordances for the psychic apprehension of environmental harm. I take *Beasts of the Southern Wild* as an exemplary object for illuminating the deep interchanges between environmental innocence and racial innocence by situating it in a longer trajectory of stagings of black childhood, from the William Blake poem cited in the film's title to Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*.

*Beasts of the Southern Wild*, filmed in the midst of the ongoing Deepwater Horizon oil spill cleanup, is a self-consciously post-Hurricane Katrina environmental narrative set on an outlying Louisiana island that Zeitlin has described as "literally forgotten by the system" (Mohney 2012; Gallo 2012). Through the subjective centering of a very young child, Hushpuppy (Quevenzhane Wallis), the film seeks to render visualizable what Rob Nixon has called the unspectacularizable—indeed, almost imperceptible—"slow violence" of environmental destruction. Why is a child's subjectivity the key to this visualization? And why must that child be a black girl who is frequently conspicuously misidentified by both age and gender? I wish to suggest that the film's temporalities of innocence, realized formally through the adoption of Hushpuppy's fantastical consciousness, depend on a racialized logic of childhood—a logic that the film attempts to transcend but ultimately only reinscribes. Yet this is not a one-way street: the film's logic also opens out for us the environmental forms already present in conceptions of racial innocence, revealing wider consequences for environmental genres and the representation of slow violence.

### Temporalities of Innocence

From the concept of the "Anthropocene," the geological period of humans' mark upon the earth, to its calls to urgent action, environmental discourses are deeply implicated in negotiations of time—too much time to comprehend, too little time in which to act (Steffen, Crutzen, and McNeill 2007; Nixon 2011, 12). Indeed, as Nixon has influentially argued, difficult temporalities are the fundamental representational challenge for environmental genres. Because the "slow violence" of environmental destruction "occurs gradually and out of sight . . . dispersed across time and space," it is (wrongly) "typically not viewed as violence at all" (Nixon 2011, 2). For

Nixon, then, this “slow violence” poses a representational problem, insofar as its effects are frequently imperceptible on an individual human scale.

In naming this representational difficulty, Nixon links temporality to one of the central tropes of environmental discourse, that of innocence and responsibility. For slow violence is an inhuman process “starring nobody” precisely because the diffuse and long-term causes of environmental harm can be ascribed to no one in particular (3). Even the naming of specific obviously responsible parties—Exxon, British Petroleum, Monsanto—all too plainly fails to capture the systemic, unevenly distributed and often only passively agential sources of environmental harm, which are now often attributed to that tentative category “the human.” Environmental innocence is a misapprehension of time that directs responsibility nowhere and everywhere. Consequently, as Margaret Ronda (2013) has pointed out, environmental discourses are conventionally routed through temporalities that dispel innocence, the “not-yet” of the environmental jeremiad (act now before it’s too late!) and the “already-over” of the environmental elegy. In each case, temporality is instrumental in disallowing environmental innocence: both urgencies reveal innocence as a false belief in *having time*, to be supplanted by the environmental text’s call to present responsibility for either past or future. “Our” belatedness trumps innocence’s temporal priority, its earliness.

*Beasts of the Southern Wild* explicitly aims to visualize slow violence. In the film, Hushpuppy, a child of about four, lives with her erratic, terminally ill father, Wink, in a bayou community called the Bathtub, in a precarious environment of natural beauty beyond the mainland’s fortified levees. Hushpuppy’s mother, meanwhile, is absent, but continually invoked, especially by Hushpuppy. From the film’s opening sequence, with rushing storm winds buffeting a teetering building, the Bathtub’s vulnerability to imminent natural disaster is made clear. Having established early on that ferocious primordial beasts called aurochs lie preserved in polar ice, the film, filtered through Hushpuppy’s consciousness, visualizes the inevitable storm and its aftermath as an event that is global in scale yet narratable and deeply tethered not only to the local but also to the personal: as the storm and its devastation progress, and Wink’s illness worsens, the ice caps melt, the monstrous aurochs are released, and they approach the Bathtub. By the film’s end, with her father dead and her community devastated, Hushpuppy claims responsibility for the devastation embodied by the aurochs and manifested in the land, and for her whole community’s future. “I’ve

gotta take care of mine,” she tells a newly subdued aurochs near the end of the film, in a visual tableau that emphasizes her physical smallness before the monsters. By adopting (or rather, producing) Hushpuppy’s subjective centering, the film brings the temporal dispersal of slow violence to human scale and, at the same time, successfully supplants environmental innocence with responsibility. Hushpuppy’s innocence (in the sense of a legitimate irresponsibility) is thus displaced from the character to the film’s representational strategies.

Yet by making a black child the figure on which the spectacularization of slow violence depends, *Beasts* shows why environmental innocence—and the representational goal of its refusal—is more complex than it might at first seem. As Robin Bernstein has so deftly shown, the assigning of responsibility to a black child is overdetermined (2011). In unpacking these dimensions of environmental innocence in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, I do not simply wish to reiterate bell hooks’s critique that “in the mind of white supremacy black children no matter their age are always seen as miniature adults,” although I am sympathetic to this critique (2012). Nor, for that matter, do I propose that innocence is an unqualified good, or that it is necessarily proper to childhood per se. Queer theory and childhood studies have usefully complicated innocence and revealed its capacity to stifle, delay, disempower, and serve as a site of predatory adult overinvestment (Stockton 2009; Kincaid 1998). Instead, I wish to track how the allocation and denial of innocence in environmental representation dovetails with already fraught allocations of child innocence. *Beasts’s* very representational successes, I wish to suggest, reveal the double binds already built into the temporalities of environmental innocence.

Gerry Canavan’s critique of the environmental jeremiad in children’s media—“The incessant refrain of the animated *Captain Planet* series that ‘The power is yours!’” he observes, “is on some level completely ridiculous”—points to the problem: *of course* children cause harm, but are they *culpable* for it (2013, 4)? Is there no exemption available for the specific kind of unknowing harm that a child might inflict, when, as Canavan rightly points out, the child in reality “controls almost no aspect of her own surroundings, much less exerts any kind of society-wide influence” (4)? In ecological terms, of course, the answer is that no such exemption exists: the plastic diaper (or, more pertinently, the broader complex of ecologically destructive postindustrial capitalism in which the child is embedded) causes harm no matter how unknowing the child is. But the terms

of ecopoiesis are social and need not be so absolute: law and ethics routinely allow the different valences of childhood's stipulated "innocence" to overlap.

Indeed, literature and culture already make a space for sanctioned and, as it were, innocent destruction: the space of fantasy, whose privileged form is the child's playing.<sup>1</sup> As François has argued, such playing has emerged in environmental policy debates as an appropriable figure for quite adult and quite culpable bodies like British Petroleum: the "metaphor of shadow-boxing or throwing punches at the air usefully describes the double impotence and impunity of the actors involved" in the Deepwater Horizon oil spill (in whose aftermath *Beasts of the Southern Wild* was filmed) (François 2014, 4; Mohney 2012). You're doing harm, but it doesn't matter (your infantile omnipotence is not real); you're doing harm, but you can't help it (in reality you are powerless to do anything else). Moreover, such playing may have a specifically ecological use: the "sense of infallibility" built into playing "may be a way of registering the eeriness of a violence so deferred and abstracted [that] its most common manifestation is [an] immunity from direct contact" (François 2014, 5). The representational problem of slow violence, in these terms, is perhaps only visualizable in the mode of provisional inconsequence—that of what François calls "shadow-boxing," or, in generic terms, of fantasy. This is the approach that Zeitlin takes in *Beasts*, building visual sequences whose fantastic, magical logic yokes local ruin to global ruin and weather to climate. The affordances of innocence or legitimate irresponsibility, though centered on Hushpuppy, are projected out from her into the film's diegesis, to be taken up by viewers. Exceptions to environmental representation's call to responsibility, realized through shadowboxing and fantasy, are portable away from the child in whose name they may be evoked.

### **Racial Innocence, Time, and Environment**

As I noted above, innocence, as one of environmental representation's key sites of contestation, is racialized, overdetermining Hushpuppy's assumption of responsibility in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*. As Bernstein has detailed in *Racial Innocence*, the construction of the black child as imperious to harm, and therefore excluded from innocence's claims to protection, has a long and insidious history whose legacy includes the racialized "school-to-prison pipeline" and the criminalization of black youth (Ber-

nstein 2011; Simmons 2009; Kim, Losen, and Hewitt 2010; Goff et al. 2014). Yet this overdetermination is not merely grounds for reproaching the film's politics (although it may serve that function as well), for if, as I have already suggested, environmental innocence is implicitly racialized, attending to temporality discloses how racial innocence is already implicitly environmental.

Innocence is a matter of absence, what James Kincaid calls "a set of *have nots*": the absence of knowledge, of experience, of culpability (legal or moral), or of guilt, and their equal capacity to rupture innocence means that putting innocence at stake renders each of them substitutable for any of the others (Kincaid 1998, 15; Stockton 2009, 12).<sup>2</sup> As Bernstein has argued, innocence is not just a quality residing in bodies or subjects, but something that has to be actively performed and reinforced through the repudiation of social categories like race, class, and gender (2011, 6). The sanctioned unknowing of innocence only confers its favors on those whose unmarked bodies can effectively shut those categories out.

Precisely because of its negative definition, innocence is constituted as temporally *prior*, whether to knowledge, to experience, or to culpable action. "Marked" bodies, as Bernstein suggests, are rarely innocent ones. I wish to insist on this past participle, "marked," which grammatically formalizes the time past: in the case of blackness in particular, "markedness" (in the linguistic sense of being conventionally taken as nonstandard) is conceptualized as *having been marked*, as being experienced and belated, *not early*. The just-so story of blackness—as if requiring explanation—takes whiteness as an originary state and blackness as somehow acquired by experience—thus antithetical, in that sense, to innocence. Moreover, that experience is conventionally troped as an environmental one. As a famous verse from the Song of Songs goes, "I am black but comely. . . . Do not look upon me [disdainfully] because I am swarthy, for the sun has gazed upon me" (Jewish Publication Society 1985, Song of Songs 1:5–6).

The temporality of racial innocence thus already participates in the forms of environmental innocence, especially in the archaic troping of blackness as a form of sunburn, in which marking is effected by environmental exposure. As Kathryn Bond Stockton has pointed out, this dynamic is shatteringly illustrated in the William Blake poem "The Little Black Boy," which the title *Beasts of the Southern Wild* obliquely cites:



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.  
 (Blake 2003)

The poem powerfully instantiates not only the racialization of innocence but also the environmentalization of race. The titular little black boy assumes responsibility for sheltering the fair-skinned English boy from the strong rays of divine presence “till he can bear, / To lean in joy upon our fathers knee” (Blake 2003). Stockton, in an incisive reading of this poem, argues that the little black boy is “queered by race”: queered in the sense that the time of his childhood is distanced from itself; he is always more mature and more *seasoned* than his supposed contemporary, the white boy, because of his blackness. Thus the black child’s melanin is made a virtue precisely insofar as it enables him to withstand divine harm and to absorb it in the English boy’s stead: a strange virtue, for, his dark skin explained as “sun-burnt,” the black boy’s exposure to divine harm is rewarded only with more such harm, and a responsibility to shelter the unharmed white boy. As Stockton notes, this song of innocence has no counterpart among the “songs of experience” because it is already about an innocence preempted by experience (2009, 32).

While Blake’s poem, which is the most explicit intertext for *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, is exemplary of the environmental significance of the already-over destruction of black innocence, the trope appears more subtly elsewhere, as well. Bernstein’s own account of “racial innocence” borrows an exemplary pair of contrasting images of children in cotton fields—a happy black child on a trade card and a miserable white child in a Lewis Hine photograph—which once again frames the black child’s alleged imperviousness to harm in environmental terms (2011, 30–33). And in a different register and a different historical moment, in an early scene in her autobiography *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, Audre Lorde offers an account of what I am tempted to call the racial “climate” of her childhood:

As a very little girl, I remember shrinking from a particular sound, a hoarsely sharp, guttural rasp, because it often meant a nasty glob of grey spittle upon my coat or shoe an instant later. My mother . . . fussed about low-class people who had no better sense nor manners than to spit into the wind no matter where they went, impressing upon me that this

humiliation was totally random. It never occurred to me to doubt her.

It was not until years later once in conversation I said to her: “Have you noticed people don’t spit into the wind so much the way they used to?” And the look on my mother’s face told me that I had blundered into one of those secret places of pain that must never be spoken of again. (1982, 17–18)

The belatedness with which Lorde apprehends the racial character of the memory recapitulates the already-over structure of black innocence: though the mother touchingly preserves her daughter’s innocence by absorbing “pain” on her daughter’s behalf, the revelation and its attendant sense of culpability are only deferred (18). The daughter finds that she has culpably “blundered” in finding out that the precipitation that seemed to come with the randomness of weather (the wind) was always the most literal and explicitly targeted racism.

As Ulrich Beck notes, “Given that many [especially environmental] threats lack any sensory character, the only way that culturally blinded daily life can become ‘sighted’ is through culturally meaningful and publicly exhibited images and symbols” (1995, 3).<sup>3</sup> Punctual scenes of racial revelation in African American writing—notable not only in Lorde but also in James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-coloured Man*, Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and Countee Cullen’s “Incident”—render the black child an available figure for visualizing the systemic violence of racism, often in explicitly environmental terms (Bernstein 2011, 2). It is thus no accident, as Bernstein has argued, that *Brown v. Board of Education* turned on the famous “doll test,” which produced scenes of black children crying (2011, 240). The punctual production of tears from the black child’s body was the tableau through which an *ambience*—“intangible” harm—could be registered (Cheng 2000, 4).

### Visualizing Slow Violence

While Lorde, Johnson, and Hurston represent racial revelation’s double bereavement (“I am not *and I never was*”) in order to expose the injuries done to black childhood, *Beasts* mobilizes it in the service of environmental representation. The film suggests from the beginning its post-Katrina awareness—which Zeitlin has noted in interviews—of the differential distribution of environmental culpability and environmental harm, starkly contrasting the goldenly lit Bathtub with shots of a mainland covered in

industrial smokestacks (Gallot 2012). Hushpuppy's voiceover continues the contrast in the film's introduction:

Daddy says, up above the levee, on the dry side, they're afraid of the water like a bunch of babies. They built the wall that cuts us off. They think we all gonna drown down here. But we ain't going nowhere. . . . Daddy's always saying that up on the dry world, they've got none of what we've got. . . . They got fish stuck in plastic wrappers; they got their babies stuck in carriages. And chicken on sticks and all that kind of stuff. One day, the storm's gonna blow, the ground's gonna sink, and the water's gonna rise up so high there ain't gonna be no Bathtub. Just a whole bunch of water.

The contrast is explicit: the mainland pollutes, with its plastic wrappers and its chicken on sticks, but it is the Bathtub that will pay. The Bathtub and the mainland to the north thus reproduce in miniature the real environmental relations of the global South to the global North, with the global North's consumption disproportionately affecting the global South.

Yet even in introducing this disparate relation, the film already mobilizes the racialized logic of environmental innocence: Hushpuppy alludes to the mainlanders as "a bunch of babies" with the utmost disdain, projecting onto them a protected status that she would not herself claim, despite (and unlike the mainlanders) her literally being a child. Babies (like Hushpuppy) don't need any protection, the film suggests, and neither does the Bathtub, even though its destruction by environmental catastrophe is the centerpiece of the film.

It is with the racial logic of environmental innocence already in place that *Beasts of the Southern Wild* aims to render slow violence representable, borrowing the African American strategy of producing punctual scenes that collapse and compress the temporal and spatial extension of harm. In the film, this is established through the titular beasts, whose release from the melting prehistoric polar ice cap marks both an irrevocable environmental catastrophe and the setting of the film's action within geologic time. Crucially, their release is tied to a punctual scene of revelation, during a fight between Hushpuppy and her terminally ill father, who slaps her to the ground and yells at her. "I hope you die," Hushpuppy returns in anger and strikes her father on the chest.

The film represents Hushpuppy's retaliation as infinitely significant within the film's fantastic register, as her wish appears to become reality

(Freud 1955, 247–48). For a moment after she strikes her father, he stands silently, as the film’s audio fills with a rushing heartbeat and the rumble of what sounds like thunder. Hushpuppy looks up at the sky, hearing the thunder, before Wink, who has recently returned from a hospital visit, falls to the ground. Frightened, Hushpuppy looks up again in the direction of the rumbling, which crashes more loudly. The film then cuts to footage of polar ice crumbling into the sea, while the continuity of audio as the film cuts back and forth between Hushpuppy’s panicked running through the woods and the crashing ice links Wink’s fall, the local storm, and the global disaster of climate change to Hushpuppy’s scene of culpability. Standing in the rising waters, Hushpuppy yells to her long-absent mother: “Mama, I think I broke something!” taking responsibility for the telescoping range of catastrophes.

The film lets us see—of course—that Hushpuppy is not really responsible for her father’s illness or for global climate change; instead, quasi-magical coincidence produces the *effect* of that responsibility: over the course of the film, alongside the storm’s indelible aftereffects, we are shown polar ice melting and the aurochs floating in chunks of ice, eventually making their way toward the Bathtub. It is an effect in which Hushpuppy fully believes. This coincidence, and especially the visual and aural relay between Wink’s fall, the local storm, and the global consequences of climate change renders slow violence representable precisely through a scene of black child innocence denied—what I have suggested is an already available, conventional device for making slow violence available for representation. That trope of racial violence is already conventionally environmental, just as, as Nixon points out and as Zeitlin, in *Beasts*, seems to wish to emphasize, the slow violence of environmental harm is frequently racial in its effects. Yet the film also seems to naturalize the symbolic burdens placed upon Hushpuppy, forcing her to accept responsibility for the catastrophe she did not make. Later in the film, after the storm has passed but its effects, in the form of flooding, have remained, Hushpuppy calls again to her absent mother. “Mama, is that you? I’ve broken everything.”

Indeed, the film brutally withholds relief for Hushpuppy’s sense of responsibility, with Wink persistently calling her a “man” and forbidding crying even as he dies. Even when Hushpuppy and some other girls from the Bathtub go off in search of her mother, the mother surrogate who makes her fried gator—echoing a story Wink has told about her real mother making fried gator—only does so while delivering a speech about self-

sufficiency.<sup>4</sup> The woman is not the “Mama” to whom Hushpuppy calls out her confessions of culpability, someone who could perhaps take responsibility in Hushpuppy’s stead: the woman refuses to go back with Hushpuppy to care for Wink, and so Hushpuppy returns to stare down the geologically scaled beasts that embody environmental harm, in a climactic profile shot staged to mark the difference between the beasts’ massive bodies and her very small one.

In *Beasts*, fantasy takes up the role of shadowboxing, allowing the diegesis to inhabit Hushpuppy’s worldview while also marking that worldview as provisional (indeed—because belonging to a child—temporary). Crucially, the portrayal of fantasy in *Beasts of the Southern Wild* depends entirely on Hushpuppy and her way of seeing the world, from the magical causality of her fight with Wink to the beasts to the Romantic communion with nature with which the film opens: dust motes glinting in the sun, Hushpuppy holds a bird up to her ear and feels the pulse of a pig, saying, “All the time, everywhere, everything’s hearts are beating and screaming and talking to each other in ways I can’t understand.” It is with the same sense of communion that she—and we—hear Wink’s heart stop beating at the end of the film. Her developmental earliness, her not-yet status, are what make fantasy a possible space for the film, just as her blackness provides the overdetermined grounds of an environmental innocence foreclosed. For Ronda and Nixon, foreclosing environmental innocence and assuming responsibility is an elusive goal of environmental representation, one that Timothy Morton has proposed in deconstructive terms as a “dark ecology” of “want[ing] to stay with a dying world,” and of “recogniz[ing] that we did it, we caused environmental destruction. . . . We imagine our own death via nature” (2007, 185).

*Beasts of the Southern Wild* seems much in line with these ecological critiques and, in all too successfully realizing their politics of responsibility, reveals their limits. Morton somewhat playfully calls his “dark ecology” “goth,” but the darkness on which *Beasts* relies is not goth but racial, and it has a history. The beasts are fantastic—markedly so, but the ecological devastation for which they serve as a figure remains fatally real.

Even if audiences are reassured, not so much by events in the film as by a generic understanding of fantasy, of her innocence, Hushpuppy herself never is. Indeed, Hushpuppy seems unnervingly to embrace the “dark ecology” that Morton proposes, insisting (like her father) on “stay[ing] with a dying world”—“We ain’t going nowhere,” she says—and even imag-

ining her own death. Indeed, this is how the film closes, after Hushpuppy sends her dead father off on a floating pyre. Hushpuppy reprises a sentiment she has already expressed once before: “When I die, the scientists of the future, they’re going to find it all. They’re going to know. Once there was a Hushpuppy, and she lived with her daddy in the Bathtub.” As she and the remaining denizens of the Bathtub walk toward the camera along a wet shore, the camera zooms away from them, allowing their figures to grow smaller and smaller, as if hurtling the audience into the future and leaving Hushpuppy and the Bathtub behind. It is telling that Hushpuppy intends for her mark on the world to be found by “scientists,” not historians: continuity and record keeping cannot be assumed; what remains of her may be bones or less. Fantasy allows audiences to view the film in a provisional way, but Hushpuppy, as far as she knows, remains culpable and responsible. The music of the film’s closing reinforces the burdening of Hushpuppy with diegetic responsibility: as the camera draws away from the shrinking people, the music builds tensely, lingering on dissonance before returning to the film’s familiar theme precisely as the Bathtub disappears and the credits begin to roll. Resolution is extradiegetic. Thus Morton’s account of a dark ecology may also serve as a summary of the film’s ending: “We fear that we will go on living, while the environment disappears around us. . . . It is worse than losing our mother” (2007, 186).

### **Meat/Petroleum**

*Beasts*’ push into dark ecology and beyond human life spans brings into relief the film’s repeated essays into a posthuman reframing of questions of innocence and responsibility. This suggests a different reading of the film from the one I have just advanced, one that, in particular, may deflect innocence’s overdetermined racial politics. This account proposes an alternate form of environmental address, one potentially less bound to negotiating the temporal foldings-over of the jeremiad and the elegy. Such reframings cast the fantastic mode of Hushpuppy’s communion with the natural world as epic and redemptive, and throw into question the very possibility of responsibility or innocence when, as Miss Bathsheeba puts it, “Meat. Meat, meat meat. Every animal is made out of meat. . . . Everything is part of the buffet of the universe.” In an early throwaway line that confirms this view, Wink gives Hushpuppy (herself named after a side dish) food—meat—and adds, “Share with the dog.” The people of the Bathtub com-

munity seem to embrace their status as “meat” for monstrous beasts and, indeed, as “beasts,” as when, at a funeral celebration, Hushpuppy begins to eat a crab and first Wink, then all present, demand that she “beast it”—tear it apart with her hands and mouth. When Hushpuppy finally acknowledges a tentative kinship with the aurochs—“You’re my friend, kind of”—she yokes this kinship to her responsibility to the Bathtub: “I’ve gotta take care of mine.” The film thus proposes Hushpuppy as a beast-affiliated posthuman hero who can shoulder responsibility for the land less by renouncing innocence than by negating its all too human terms.

Hushpuppy’s potential posthuman status recasts her earliness (her youth) in another way, turning her into a primordial figure who communes with, and is possible food for, the ancient aurochs, and who, in her final monologue, places herself in relation to a distant future. The film’s ending, with its triumphant music, can fairly be read as an apotheosis, as Hushpuppy buries herself in a future ancient history to be discovered by “the scientists of the future.” Yet as Stephanie LeMenager has observed, “The sacred is invoked when social death has already occurred, and civil rights suspended,” and the curiously primordial (not to say primitive) terms on which Hushpuppy is made a hero (and made responsible) show how temporal earliness remains burdened (32). Her final words not only point forward but also echo a frightening early scene in which she hides from her angry father and from the flames in her burning house in a cardboard box, drawing figures reminiscent of cave paintings and projecting her own future ancientness: “If Daddy kills me, I ain’t going to be forgotten. I’m recording my story for the scientists in the future.” She is thus a curiously prehuman posthuman, figured, with her frequently misidentified gender and age, as protean and primordial. As the camera pulls away from the Bathtub in the film’s final scene, placing it in an increasingly distant past, Hushpuppy becomes not only meat but also future fossil, future petroleum, literalizing the promise of the Anthropocene (the mark of the human on the geological record). Rather than negating Hushpuppy’s temporal earliness, we might say, a posthuman reading of the film heightens it. The film thus straightens out the temporal kinks of environmental address by relocating Hushpuppy to an end point and, in the same gesture, seeks to obviate the claims of innocence on race—or of race on innocence. “Our” belatedness no longer trumps innocence’s temporal priority; its earliness is simply made archaic, while the slow violence of the film’s diegesis comes to appear—deceptively—*past*.



This recuperation of Hushpuppy's earliness, in seeking to supersede the terms of "innocence," then, is not a radical affirmation of the child or of childishness, or even of "meat," but rather a refusal of her personhood. The posthuman reading neither leaves Hushpuppy's innocence intact nor lodges the critique of innocence that we might expect: the hoary proposition that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny and that children in some nontrivial sense *are* beasts. To put it another way, the film is not meaningfully "against survival" in Lee Edelman's sense (2011). Rather, perpetually fathered ("with her daddy in the Bathtub"), she is made to "survive" precisely on another's terms (ours). The film wants—indeed, requires—a responsible Hushpuppy, but it does not want a Hushpuppy who is grown up, or a woman, or anything other than the ambiguously gendered, protean minicreature who gets called a "man" and a "baby" and who eats like a beast and is food for beasts.

What the viability of this reading reveals is the degree to which *Beasts of the Southern Wild* aims to be a film about environment and *not* about race, and not only because reviews have repeatedly noted the "multiracial" character of the Bathtub (Denby 2012; hooks 2012; Scott 2012). The posthumanist strain of this film powerfully strives to explode the categories of race, gender, age, and indeed, the human. This is not an outlandish strategy for environmental thinking, which, as Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009) among others has argued, demands a decentering of the human in favor of other and bigger time scales. Yet in *Beasts*, it is one that supersedes humanity only after humanity's supposed affordances—like childhood's supposed affordances, namely innocence—have already been evacuated. This is shadowboxing indeed. A prominent recent psychological study of the "dehumanization" of black children and their consequent treatment as adults, for example, unselfconsciously takes a humanist frame for granted, analyzing the damaging effects of comparing children to animals or vermin (Goff et al. 2014, 527–28). Beyond the familiar objection that posthumanist gestures risk erasing categories of structural domination that still remain very much in operation, *Beasts* discloses that environmental representation comes with investments that are not obviously and directly about environment. The structure of innocence means that there are people who don't know, and there are people who don't *get* to not know, and it is beyond the logic of innocence that agency lies.



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## Notes

1. Thus D. W. Winnicott’s account of “reality-testing,” which may be violent, forms a part of his theory of playing (1971, 15).
2. As Kathryn Bond Stockton has argued, its only positive sign, often, is a state of victimhood or of weakness (Stockton 2009, 31).
3. I wish to subordinate Beck’s ableist figure of speech to his point about representability, which differs usefully from Nixon’s.
4. Sometimes this woman is interpreted as really being Hushpuppy’s mother, although she tells Hushpuppy, “Don’t know nothing ’bout your daddy.”

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