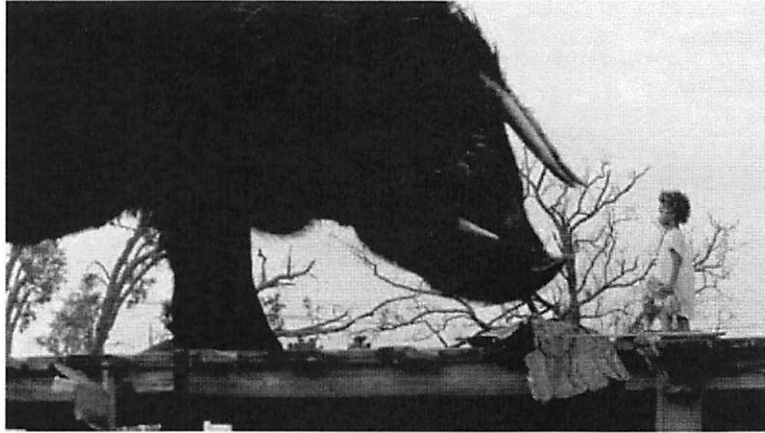


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bell hooks: "No Love in the Wild"



[<http://3.bp.blogspot.com/-hH9WXaW0Jdo/UEgZV7zbNfl/AAAAAAAAAFv8/Z8V44-eAfGU/s1600/1aa-beasts-southern-review-art0-gggi9noi-1beasts-of-the-southern-wild---6-jpg.jpg>]

No Love in the Wild

by bell hooks | special to **NewBlackMan (in Exile)**

An often repeated assertion in the body of film criticism I have written is the assertion that movies do not just mirror the culture of any given time; they also create it. With this assertion in mind I leaving a viewing of the film *Beasts of the Southern Wilds* deeply disturbed and militantly outraged by the images I have just seen. Having traveled with friends an hour to see this acclaimed movie, I have no way home if I leave the cinema; there were images in the movie that I just did not want inside my head. Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hahn tells students that putting images inside our heads is just like eating. And if “you are what you eat” it is equally true that to a grave extent we are what we see. Having read wonderful reviews of the film, pushed by friends and colleagues alike to see it, I was amazed that what I saw, they did not see. The majority of folks I talked with, like the reviewers, praised the film’s compelling cinematography, the magical realism, and the poetics of space. In his long affirming review in the *New Yorker* critic [David Denby](http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/culture/2012/06/beasts-of-the-southern-wild.html) [<http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/culture/2012/06/beasts-of-the-southern-wild.html>], praises the film, calling it a “vibrant feature.”

Sadly, all the vibrancy in this film is generated by a crude pornography of violence. At the center of this spectacle is the continuous physical and emotional violation of the body and being of a small six year old black girl called Hushpuppy (played by the ten year old actress Quvenzane Wallis). While she is portrayed as continuously resisting and refusing to be a victim, she is victimized. Subject to both romanticization as a modern primitive and eroticization, her plight is presented as comically farcical. Some audiences laugh as Hushpuppy, when enraged at the antics of her disappearing alcoholic oftentimes abusive wild man dad Wink, burns her shanty house. Initially, she hides from the fire in an overturned cardboard box until Wink rescues her by fiercely yelling mean spirited words that both frighten her and lead her to run for her life; in that moment she is more terrified of her raging dad than she is of the fire.

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Hushpuppy has a resilient spirit. She is indeed a miniature version of the ‘strong black female matriarch,’ racist and sexist representations have depicted from slavery on into the present day. Like the unrealistic racist/sexist stereotypical images of grown black women in the recent blockbuster film *The Help* who confront all manner of exploitation and oppression only to triumph in this ridiculous macabre fantasy of modern primitivism, Hushpuppy is a survivor. From the onset of the film, she is depicted as a wild child, so at home in the natural wild of the Gulf of Mexico bayou world where black and white po’ folks create their own community affectionately called the Bathtub. This is the territory they claim as a renegade place of belonging. It is a total homemade world of make do, use whatever you got to survive.

Nature is the most compelling force in the world of the Bathtub. In this world there is no us-against-them mentality when it comes to human and nature. Instead there is an intimate merger so complete celebration of their collective feral animal nature binds everyone in a sacred contract; they are to resist domestication and civilization at all costs. As Diane Ackerman states in her short essay "Natural Wonder:" [http://www.shambhalasun.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=3941&Itemid=244], "Nature is both personal and panoramic, including a profound sense of our animal essence...All of our being juices, flesh, and spirit is nature. Nature surrounds, permeates, effervesces in, and includes us. At the end of our days, it deranges and disassembles us... There, once living beings, we return to our non-living elements, but we still and forever remain a part of nature." As explanation this declaration provides the metaphysical backdrop for the role nature plays in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*. The natural setting that serves as poignant poetic backdrop is real and imaginary in the film. Hushpuppy finds solace in natural wildness, listening to the heartbeat of animals, envisioning her connection to a primordial world, what anthropologist Carl Sauer calls "the world before the coming of the white man." Hushpuppy has visions of a natural world humans are destroying. And even though the other black and white members of the Bathtub community do not share her visions they share the commitment to remain in the wild even as the waters rise. It is the survivalist narrative that seems to most enchant viewers of this film, allowing them to overlook violence, eroticization of children, and all manner of dirt and filth. Just as television audiences remain glued to their seats watching the reality shows that focus on humans struggling against harsh unnatural circumstances and each other to survive, audiences of *Beasts of the Southern Wild* enjoy this same rush. As in these everyday television survivalist narratives, humans in the film are both at one with nature even as they are potential victims of a harsh natural world that respects no categories of race, class, or gender. Of course the message that only the strong survive has been and remains an age old argument for politics of domination, that determine that some folks will live and others will die, that the strong will necessarily rule over the weak.

For many folks who see this film it is the mythic focus that enchants. And yet it is precisely this mythic focus that deflects attention away from egregious sub-textual narratives present in the film. Writing about the role of myth in popular media that makes use of race in his book *White Lies: Race and the Myths of Whiteness* [http://books.google.com/books/about/White_Lies.html?id=2cVUbkaM6eAC] critic Maurice Berger contends: "Despite the visual sophistication and supposed vigilance of a media-oriented culture ... Western commentators, critics, and academics seem not to realize how duplicitous words and images can be. They simply do not understand how myths work, how myths hold us hostage to their smooth elegant fictions. The subject of race, perhaps more than any other subject in contemporary life feeds on myth.... Myth is the book, seamless narrative that tells us the contradictions and incongruities of race and racism are too confusing or too dangerous to articulate. Myths provide the elegant deceptions that reinforce our unconscious prejudices. Myths are the white lies that tell us everything is all right, even when it is not." Deploying myth and fantasy we are shown a world in *Beasts of the Southern Wild* where black and white poor folks live together in utopian harmony. No race talk, no racial discourse disturbs the peace.

Only Hushpuppy has a philosophical take on why the world is the way it is, but she like everyone else denies the reality of race. Relying on myth and fantasy to survive day to day, this six-year-old prophet shares that we must experience our interdependence and oneness with all living beings and with the past, present, future. When the big primordial black beasts of her imagination come to confront her she speaks to them declaring "you're my friends sort of." With this statement she acknowledges that nature is both friend and enemy. For it is the powerful waters of nature that threaten the entire world of the Bathtub leaving death in its wake. That Hushpuppy has this advanced state of cosmic consciousness is one of the fanciful and irritating aspects of the film. She is only six years old. Of course in the mindset of white supremacy black children no matter their age are always seen as miniature adults."

Even though black and white folks who are different share space and live in harmony, embracing the notion that their solidarity is touted in fierce independence, in the willingness to live beyond the law in a world where they make their own rules. Even though such utopian values are depicted as awesomely positive in the film, ultimately it is patriarchal masculinity that rules, that makes the decision. The more crazed, reckless, and violent the alpha male's behavior the greater his control and dominance. In the closed community of the Bathtub Hushpuppy's father Wink is the undisputed leader despite the fact that he is almost always ranting and raging with bottle of booze in hand. His male

companions are all drinking buddies. Women, whether black or white, drink but say very little; they do not question male authority. When they do speak whether in their role as teacher or prostitute they are simply imparting to children a crude message of self-reliance. They teach the children that they can count on no one.

Hushpuppy's father is the most vocal advocate of a lawless reckless independence. Wink is the representative hard badass black man. His character is a composite of all the racist/sexist hateful stereotypes that mass media projects about black masculinity. In his study of black masculinity *From Jim Crow to Jay Z* [http://books.google.com/books/about/From_Jim_Crow_to_Jay_Z.html?id=O0n-lvfxsEUC], Miles White reminds readers from the onset of their appearance in films black males were portrayed as "brute or the folkloric bad nigger figure, a lawless man, feared by black and whites alike." White explains that black male bodies are consistently used in cinema to represent the "brute who is immune to physical and emotional pain." Even though he is sick and dying from an unnamed disease that causes him to cough and spit blood he remains the ruthless leader of the pack; his hard badness made evident in matter large and small (whether orchestrating the bombing of the levy or in violent attacks on his little daughter).

Indeed, one of the most disturbing scenes in the film highlights Wink's dominance and control over everyone, especially Hushpuppy. All the members of the Bathtub community are sitting at the dinner table drinking booze eating fresh crabs. White and black together are all happily drinking and eating. One of the grown white males attempts to show Hushpuppy the 'proper' way to extract the meat. Watching this Wink erupts into a volcanic rage and screams at Hushpuppy to BEAST IT (i.e. break the crab in half with her bare hands and suck the meat out.) Hushpuppy's mood shifts from that of happy-go-lucky child to one of fear and terror. All the grown folks watch as she struggles to obey the commands of the father chanting loudly BEAST IT. When she succeeds everyone cheers that she is the man. She holds her arms in the air as though she is a prizefighter who has just won a fight. And is told, "you're the man."

This transgender casting of Hushpuppy as sometimes representing maleness and sometimes femaleness is the constant image when the film begins. From the onset of the movie the camera highlights the back of the child's body wearing a thin white undershirt and orange boy briefs leading onlookers to wonder are we seeing a boy or a girl. Again and again the camera zooms in on Hushpuppy's behind. We see her gleefully running and jumping. Audiences wait for a gendered identity to be revealed. Clearly the camera toys with the child's body pornographically eroticizing the image.

Lucy Alibar, the white female playwright who wrote *Juicy and Delicious* a play set in Georgia, was clear with this drama, which served as the creative foundation for *Beasts*, that her protagonist was a ten-year-old boy. With her directing partner Benh Zeitlin she changed the setting to a Louisiana bayou and the star of the show became a six year old black girl. And it is mighty odd that the story by Doris Betts from which the film derives its name has one of the most sexist and racist representations of black masculinity in contemporary southern literature. Given the recent mega success of films featuring southern black females this choice has an opportunistic flavor. And as with the other films, like *The Help*, representations of black folks are re-mixes of old racist and sexist stereotypes. Images of Hushpuppy echo those of Buckwheat from the once popular television show *Our Gang*.

Throughout *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, Wink acts as though he would prefer Hushpuppy to be male. His affectionate gestures towards her are often given as a reward for her enactment of meaningless violence especially when she mimics the behavior of a raging patriarchal male, which Wind personifies. Indeed, gender is performance in the film. When Hushpuppy and all the residents of the Bathtub are 'rescued' and taken to a shelter we see her transformed – clean, hair combed and plaited wearing a dress. In that moment she represents perfect domesticated tamed girlhood. But the film soon reminds us this is not the 'real' Hushpuppy who as soon as she breaks free of civilization will return to her feral untamed transgendered self. Queer theory helps everyone to understand gender as performance. In an essay on queer theory specifically focusing on the work of Judith 'Jack' Halberstam [writer Jeffrey Williams](http://chronicle.com/article/Queer-20/130156/) [<http://chronicle.com/article/Queer-20/130156/>] talks about the ways she /he 'complicates gender.' He contends: "whether gender was constructed or natural; it implied a given content; a performance suggested a temporal act."

Without healthy parenting Hushpuppy has no human being who offers her object constancy; she finds her grounding in nature. Presented as a child of the wild she basically parents herself. Her mama is absent. Made visible only by Wink's reminiscence of their sexual bond which he unabashedly shares with Hushpuppy as though he is speaking with another grown person; there are no full frontal camera shot of the mother. Just as the camera focus on the behind of the child wearing her boy briefs, Wink identifies Hushpuppy's mother by her ass. She is portrayed as wearing white boy briefs. Talking nostalgically to Hushpuppy about her mother Wink defines her by her hot sexuality. Again the focus is on her behind, which is so sexually 'hot' Wink tells Hushpuppy that when her mama enters the kitchen, her hot ass turns on burners on the stove, boiling water, making the oven hot. Again as with Hushpuppy the camera zooms in on the mother's ass.

In the absence of the body and being of the mother to establish object constancy, to teach her 'female roles' showing her own to live as a female in the wild, Hushpuppy projects that she hears the voice of the mother guiding her. Talking to the imaginary mother Hushpuppy places a sports jersey on a chair as symbolic mother and then the conversation begins. The jersey suggests symbolic deconstruction of gender. Without the body and being of the mother to help Hushpuppy establish a sense of self she dares to symbolically give birth to the mother by giving her a voice. We never know what silences the voice of the mother just as there is no explanation for her absence.

When the girls of the Bathtub are 'rescued' by a white male looking for survivors of the storm they are taken to a juke joint/whore house identified first by the neon sign announcing "girls, girls, girls." Like so much else that makes no sense in this film it is not clear why the wise little Hushpuppy comes aboard this boat and allows her and her friends to be taken by a white male stranger arousing fears in the onlooker that the girls are destined to be the victim of a male sexual predator. However, at the juke joint it are grown women, white and black, who touch and hold the girls in ways that are inappropriate, at times maternal then sexual. Adult male sexual predators are observers of these interactions. Hushpuppy is ushered into a private room where a sexy good-looking black woman assumes a maternal role towards her, holding her, cooking her food.

When this new symbolic mother, who like the biological mom has no name, holds the small girl in her arms, cradling her, Hushpuppy says: "I can count on two hands the times when I've been lifted up." This is the bold declaration that lets viewers know that Hushpuppy suffers psychologically from the traumatic pain in her childhood, that she is wounded by life with a violent raging alcoholic father, by the loss of her mother, and ultimately the death that will claim her dad. But she is only given cooked food and emotional shelter for a brief moment in time. With this feeding she is also given a lesson in survival, told that she has only her self to count on, that no else will be there for her, that she must be 'strong.' This is certainly the message black females have received in the culture of imperialist capitalist white supremacist patriarchy from slavery on into the present day.

Wink teaches his daughter showing emotions is a sign of weakness, that she must be tough. When she cries because her daddy is dying, he tells her to let those tears go. Parent and child roles are reversed, Hushpuppy becomes the pseudo adult hospice caregiver easing her father's passage back to the watery womb of nature. At times Wink is affectionate and caring towards his child but rage always engulfs their brief bittersweet positive encounters. Engaged in brutal acts of repressing emotions or acting them out, Wink is a hard man without any boundaries. His pain and his pleasure are a constant mix and his mood shifts are as erratic and unplanned as the storms that threaten everyone's well being. Of course after his rage passes like the storms in the natural world there is silence, calm, peace.

Hushpuppy finds her place of solace of calm in constructing a mythic life as she can have no meaningful grounding in reality. Her strength lies in cultivating the imaginary and living life as fantasy. Mirroring Wink she is trapped in a state of arrested development. Wink and his fellow inhabitants of the Bathtub choose to see their emotional responses as mystical revelations, as the primal blood speaking at the core of their being. Concerned with remaining always in touch with his untamed nature writer D. H. Lawrence [<http://homepages.wmich.edu/%7Ecooneys/poems/dhl.letters.html>] provides a manifesto that can easily refer to the community values of the Bathtub declaring: "My religion is a belief in the blood, the flesh, as being wiser than the intellect. We can go wrong in our minds but what

our blood feels and believes and says is always true." In keeping with this emotionality of the blood Wink is dying of an unnamed disease that causes him to spit blood. Not only must Hushpuppy feed and comfort him, she (not his adult male drinking, not even the adult white male whom Winks declared will be her new father when he is gone assist or comfort her. Hushpuppy does not respond to this announcement, the white male does not claim her or help her build the floating funeral pyre where Wink lies awaiting his return to nature.

As she is throughout this film Hushpuppy is again abandoned. It is a major mystery that moviegoers adore this film and find it deeply moving and entertaining. Amid many real life tragedies of adult violation of children (i.e. Penn State,) violations that subject small children to verbal abuse, physical and psychological violence' sexual assault, it is truly a surreal imagination that can look past the traumatic abuse Hushpuppy endures and be mesmerized and entertained by *Beasts of the Southern Wild*.

Ultimately this film expresses a conservative agenda. Before audiences had a clue about its content, the notion that it was somehow a radical response to Katrina circulated. But there is nothing radical about the age-old politics of domination the movie espouses – insisting that only the strong survive, that disease weeds out the weak (i.e. the slaughter of Native Americans,) that nature chooses excluding and including. If Wink represents the dying untamed primitive then what does Hushpuppy represent. Her fate is unclear. Given all that she endures she may just end up being the mad black female, talking to herself, wandering in a wilderness of spirit so profound that she is forever lost.

No wonder then that seeing this film causes some of us to feel a deep sense of hurt and remembered pain. Sorrow for all the lost traumatized children, but especially abused and abandoned black children, whose bodies become the playing fields where pornographies of violence are hidden behind romantic evocations of mythic union and reunion with nature. In the end there is no one to lift these small bodies up, to call down from the skies a healing grace that can redeem and set free. R and B artist Jackie Wilson sang of a love that lifts one higher. For Hushpuppy and those like her, there is no love, no hands holding on, just a blank emptiness onto which any mark can be placed, any fantastical story written. All along the way Hushpuppy has not been at the center of *Beasts of the Southern Wild*. She is marginalized; she is a backup singer. No wonder then, so few listeners fail to choose a standpoint where they might witness her suffering or hear her ongoing anguished lament.

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