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# *Beasts of the Southern Wild* and Indigenous Communities in the Age of the Sixth Extinction

BRIANNA BURKE

Sometimes you can break something so  
bad that it can't get put back together.

—*Beasts of the Southern Wild*

Island Road in Louisiana seems to lead to nowhere. An hour and forty minutes southwest of New Orleans, deep in the bayou, Island Road was built on marshlands in 1953, but in the sixty years since, those have melted into the sea. Now hemmed in by water on both sides, for portions of the year Island Road is flooded and impassable, and it dead-ends into the Gulf of Mexico; not much to see and no reason to go out there, or so some folks might think. In fact, many think it is “irresponsible” to live in such a place, threatened by sea-level rise and intensifying storms. But Island Road leads to Isle de Jean Charles, home to the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw, and is the road that begins and ends our journey as viewers in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*.

A syncretic, messy, and aesthetically gorgeous film that director Behn Zeitlin calls “an epic folktale,”<sup>1</sup> *Beasts of the Southern Wild* is narrated by a young girl called Hushpuppy as “the fabric of the universe unravels,” threatening the survival of her community.<sup>2</sup> For Hushpuppy and her neighbors, the slow disintegration of community, home, and environment is both deeply personal and political, linked by a careful layering of shots and purposeful cuts to the effects of corporate exploitation and to climate change through a parallel narrative about the aurochs, a species driven to extinction in 1627.<sup>3</sup> Through linking the multiple narratives of community, exploitation, and extinction, *Beasts* eulogizes the loss of an entire cosmos—with its attendant emplacement, culture, and

lifeways—as the people of Jean Charles have always known it and asks viewers to attempt to understand a loss so profound that it is beyond mere words; instead, it must be *witnessed*.

But the political project of *Beasts of the Southern Wild* does not end by asking us to bear witness. The film reflects on the position of many indigenous communities in the United States and around the world by intertwining dueling definitions of “beast.” On one hand, the film illuminates a dangerous reality in our modern era: as storms grow more powerful, as sea levels rise, as resources become increasingly scarce, more people are positioned as disposable, as nothing more than mere beasts—particularly communities who live lives deeply connected to and dependent on their local ecosystems. In other words, *Beasts* shows how speciesism can be used by environmental racism to portray specific groups of human beings *as* animals, so radically different that they aren’t *homo sapiens* but an entirely different species, and thus, as animal bodies, they lose rights, become mere flesh for consumption or experimentation, or vulnerable to *extinction*, like any other animal species unable to adapt to a rapidly changing planet in the age of the sixth mass extinction.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, *Beasts* flips this rhetoric by proclaiming a curiously indigenous belief for a nonindigenous film: *we are all beasts* living at the mercy of the ecological systems—now fracturing and breaking down—that have sustained life on this planet. Put differently, it espouses a cosmopolitics that ruptures the human/nature or human/animal binary and therefore rejects a form of racism that invokes species difference to justify victimization.

Primarily, I am interested in how *Beasts of the Southern Wild* creates an environmental justice folktale unique to the twenty-first century as it connects the effects of corporate exploitation directly to climate change and shows how both will affect not only humans, but equally many other species on this planet. However, “species” has not been part of the environmental justice matrix, which illustrates how environmental burdens are distributed among human bodies unequally, following the well-worn ideologies of racism, classism, and sexism. As a field, environmental justice argues that environments are always both constructed and natural (even so-called “wild” places) and views the human body as situated within and inhabited by the chemical, cultural, political, and ecological networks of place—what Stacy Alaimo calls “transcorporeality.” In part, the field of environmental justice arose as

a response to a kind of antihuman environmentalism (which focused solely on conservation) by showing that human bodies are deeply networked into environmental processes, not apart from them. But environmental justice needs to expand to encompass the more than human—those other beings/bodies (including other species and also what scholar Marisol de la Cadena calls earth beings) with whom human existence is intermeshed—because they, too, experience environmental injustice. Moreover, the injustices inflicted on other species/beings always, with no exceptions, impacts local human populations as well. The carefully constructed and rigidly enforced boundary between human and animal is and has always been fungible. Not only are all species—including humans—in jeopardy due to climate change, but the ideologies used to support disposability of living beings do not respect species boundaries, it turns out. Ideologies are slippery, after all. They ooze, transform, transgress, and become transcorporeal, and this is exactly what is happening to the ideologies used to support domination through (species) difference. *Beasts of the Southern Wild* is a perfect visual allegory for how the animalization of specific populations positions them as disposable, as any other animal species struggling—and failing—to “adapt” to an increasingly volatile planet.

The film opens with a powerful environmental ethic that establishes our interdependence on all living beings as Hushpuppy ruminates on the world around her. She wanders in the company of the animals her family cares for and which care for her family, listening to their heartbeats, and says, “All the time, everywhere, everything’s hearts are beatin’ and squirtin’ and talkin’ to each other in ways I can’t understand.”<sup>5</sup> This is the very beginning of an alternative narrative I will argue subverts speciesism and one I will return to shortly. But quickly after espousing this environmental ethic, before the title appears on screen, Hushpuppy and her father, Wink, float on the bayou, looking at a large offshore oil production site surrounded by scraggly dead brush and an enormous levee. Floating next to it, they appear inconsequential in the frame, tiny and powerless, just as the people of Isle de Jean Charles and many other communities around the world are made to feel when protesting the near totality of petrocorporate power. The two stare at the industrial complex as the camera zooms in first on Wink’s face, then on Hushpuppy’s, before cutting to smog billowing into the sky as Wink says, “Ain’t that ugly over there? We got the prettiest place on Earth.”<sup>6</sup> In

a voice-over, Hushpuppy explains, “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.*”<sup>7</sup> Next we see a shot of “the Bathtub” (what the people of Isle de Jean Charles lovingly call their community and where Hushpuppy lives in the film) from the sky. The film cuts to a raucous party; white, creole, African American, and indigenous people celebrate together, a community mixed in almost every way except for what most people would see as their common extreme poverty. Hushpuppy explains that in “the dry world,” people live artificial existences with prepackaged, aesthetically “clean” food and “all that kind of *stuff*,” but the people of the Bathtub choose to live differently, she implies, as the film cuts to a waterfall of fresh seafood, even while they understand they live on the edge of a threatened world.<sup>8</sup>

*Roll opening credits.*

In these first eight minutes, Zeitlin gives the viewer a quick taste of each thread woven throughout the narrative: a land-based environmental ethic born from intimate relationships to, and interdependence on, place; a vision of humanity in which we take care of other species so that, in the end, they take care of us (yes, sometimes by becoming our food); petrocorporate exploitation, land erosion, and climate change; what it means to live in a “national sacrifice zone”<sup>9</sup>; clashing definitions of what it means to live well, or a critique of the commodity obsession of modern society; approaching environmental calamity; and the importance of place, culture, and community. Before tackling *Beasts of the Southern Wild* as a full-length feature film, Zeitlin was known for his short pieces, and it is easy to see why: all the connections *Beasts of the Southern Wild* expands on are cut closely together and layered within the first few minutes. Viewers understand this is a vibrant community threatened by destruction. What these people stand to lose is exactly everything—their community, culture, environment, homes, and possibly even their lives.

So it is worth asking: With so much at stake, why would anyone stay in such a place? That is the precise question Zeitlin set out to answer through his film. In numerous interviews, he admitted that he originally intended to investigate land erosion in Louisiana and understand why “people stay in a place when you know that the place you live in is doomed.”<sup>10</sup> Yet contact with the place and its people changed the story Zeitlin planned to tell. Through conversations with the surrounding

communities of Isle de Jean Charles and two other neighboring indigenous communities, Pointe aux Chenes and the Houma, Zeitlin's script began to change. He and his crew found that simply leaving the region wasn't an option for many residents, and they realized that writing a film about land erosion wouldn't tell the whole story. As Ray Tintori, special effects manager, comments in an interview, "Reality caught up with us. And it was like, oh my god, it is actually worse than what is in our film."<sup>11</sup> To tell the story of the residents, the film became about inhabited dispossession.

To put it another way, Zeitlin found himself in the middle of conflicting definitions of cosmos, caught in what Isabelle Stengers and, afterward, Bruno Latour call "cosmopolitics." To view a place as doomed and to imagine that a community can simply pick up and leave (With what money? And to where?) betrays a specific imperialist construction of the cosmos where nature is separate from culture and thus separate from self. In this philosophy, transiency is a fact of life; loss of place doesn't obliterate one's sense of self. In her recent book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer writes eloquently about the differing views of land held by Westerners and indigenous peoples. She writes, "In the settler mind, land was property, real estate, capital, or natural resources. But to our people, it was everything: identity, the connection to our ancestors, the home of our nonhuman kinfolk, our pharmacy, our library, the source of all that sustained us."<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Stengers and Latour—along with recent multispecies ethnographers like Marisol de la Cadena, anthropologists like Viveros de Castro, and environmental justice scholars like Joni Adamson—argue that the vision of a world as a single, codifiable, and knowable entity called "The Universe" has political consequences for those dominated by colonial ideology who see the world as a completely different place operating under completely different "laws." These scholars argue for a real-world cosmopolitics, a political process that recognizes that we live among peoples who have varying conceptions of "nature" or "cosmos," and even what is and is not "alive. Arguing for a radical reinterpretation of the binary with the human on one side and the natural, nonhuman, and animal on the other side, Kim TallBear notes that for many indigenous communities, "our nonhuman others may not be understood in even critical western frameworks as living."<sup>13</sup> The position of the human in these worldviews is much more intermeshed with place than the predominately Western

EuroAmerican interpretation of the world; one's culture, identity, and self are defined through and by emplacement. *Beasts of the Southern Wild* is Zeitlin's exploration of the conflicting cosmopolitics surrounding Isle de Jean Charles, and so the film is entangled in a complicated web of conflicting histories, politics, and power struggles.

### Becoming Beast

The collusion between environmental racism (these people are disposable) and speciesism (animals are subordinate to humans, and these people are animals) occurs most frequently to communities that live in close interdependence with their local ecosystems, as the people of Isle de Jean Charles do. On one hand, interdependence allows these communities some measure of independence from the capitalist wage-earning economy, and they understand the full impact of their lives on their ecosystem—a reality all of us could stand to recognize. On the other hand, while they may be rich in their relationships to place, they often live in what appears to modern society as extreme poverty. As one reviewer notes of the characters in the film, “in our consumptive culture, actually living with less often ends up looking a lot like being poor.”<sup>14</sup> In turn, their poverty contributes even further to their marginalization and animalization. Not only are they frequently targeted to carry the burden of infrastructure and industrial pollution because they have no means to fight such development, but also their desire to maintain an interdependent relationship with place further positions them as “outside” and thus as “savage,” “uncivilized,” or, I argue, animal. bell hooks, well-known political activist and critic of institutionalized racism in the United States, views the conflation between human and animal in *Beasts of the Southern Wild* as disturbing, writing that the “collective feral animal nature binds everyone” in the film.<sup>15</sup> It is a sad fact that maintaining close relationships with place and its ecosystem often looks like choosing to remain poor and outside modernity, but the choice these communities are given is between maintaining their way of life or dissolution.

In fact, many environmental justice scholars have repeatedly proven that poor communities have very few choices when it comes to how their environments are exploited. In *American Indian Literature, En-*

*Environmental Justice, and Ecocriticism: The Middle Place* Joni Adamson writes,

The human and nonhuman populations considered closest to nature and part of the “wilderness” landscape are deemed Others who are in need of control and domination. The places where they live are defined and interpreted as either valuable national treasures or expendable sacrifice zones. Thus, Euro-American readings of the landscape have literally meant the difference between life and death for entire species and communities.<sup>16</sup>

It is precisely the connection between threatened species and threatened human communities that I am interested in. Marisol de la Cadena builds on Adamson’s point in her writings on communities positioned similarly in South America in “Indigenous Cosmopolitics in the Andes” when she argues that indigenous peoples can be “left to die because, although included in the concept of ‘Humanity’, they do not count—at all, for they are too close to ‘Nature.’”<sup>17</sup> In a symposium on Animal Studies and Critical Race Theory in 2011 at Berkeley called “Why the Animal?,” Kim TallBear noted in her opening comments that “violence against animals is linked to violence against particular humans who have historically been linked to animality. There are real implications . . . for who and what gets to live, and who and what gets to die when the human/animal split is made.”<sup>18</sup> In other words, Adamson, de la Cadena, and TallBear point out that our carefully constructed and carefully maintained boundaries between human and animal (or between nature and culture) only apply to *specific* groups of human beings. Furthermore, some human beings can maintain these carefully constructed categories because we have been taught not to see nature as an alive and dynamic being with its own rights; instead, we have come to see it as a machine, each mechanism—mineral, plant, or animal—existing solely for human use. Carolyn Merchant famously made this argument in her 1980 book, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*. Indigenous writers have always asserted that their peoples have different relationships with place, within early texts written by Sara Winnemucca, Zitkála-Šá, and Charles Eastman and continuing into the present with writers like Vine Deloria Jr., Louise Erdrich, Robin Wall Kimmerer, Kim TallBear, and Kyle Powys Whyte—just to name



a small few of many writers in both eras (and only from the United States). So what happens, then, when you and your neighbors suddenly are deemed “too close to ‘Nature’” and become what Adamson calls “sacrifice people,” just another valueless species in a “doomed” (to use Zeitlin’s word) environment?

It is within the parallel narrative of the aurochs that *Beasts of the Southern Wild* illuminates the connections between how human communities who live in interdependence with their local ecosystems can, like the aurochs or any other species, become imperiled precisely through their interdependence. Without this alternative narrative of the aurochs, the film would still be about loss of place, but not about loss of *emplacement* or of cosmos. In other words, the aurochs narrative changes the loss experienced by the people of Isle de Jean Charles from loss of land to an apocalypse or to the extinction event it actually is; and in fact, the aurochs went extinct for the exact same reason that threatens the people of Isle de Jean Charles—because of loss of habitat due to human destruction.<sup>19</sup> Zeitlin introduces the parallel narrative of the aurochs very early in the film, in the first scene after the opening credits. In this scene, Hushpuppy and the other children are in school as their teacher, Miss Bathsheba, explains their place in the world. Surrounded by animals, herbs, maps, and books, Miss Bathsheba pours a jumble of crabs, shrimp, and crayfish into a large square pen as the children look on. “Meat, meat, meat,” she says. “I’m meat, y’all’s ass is meat, everything is part of the buffet of the universe.”<sup>20</sup> As Miss Bathsheba talks, the camera work reinforces the connections she makes as it cuts between the children’s faces, the marine life on the table, and an owl in a cage. In this lesson plan, Miss Bathsheba teaches the children that they are one piece of an ecological chain, and she goes on to tell them that they aren’t even the most important part; once, humans were prey. “This here is an aurochs,” she says, showing the children a tattoo on her leg that looks like the paintings of aurochs in the cave at Lascaux, “a fierce, mean creature that walked the face of the earth back when we all lived in caves.”<sup>21</sup> The aurochs once preyed on humans, who couldn’t do anything about it because they were “too poor and too small,” so instead, the humans learned survival skills. Miss Bathsheba warns, “Y’all better think about that, ‘cause any day now, the fabric of the universe is comin’ 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.”<sup>22</sup>

In truth, aurochs never hunted human beings; other than their human-caused extermination, the aurochs in the film depart from reality entirely. Far from fierce, they were a kind of wild cattle, but Zeitlin and his character Bathsheba use them to make a point. By tying their story to that of Hushpuppy's community, "too poor and too small" to fight the forces colluding against them, the aurochs are used to build a web of connections between two extinction events, one in the past and one in the future, linked through a careful layering of shots to the multiple causes for these extinction events. Like the aurochs driven to extinction in 1627 by human-caused destruction of their habitat, the people of the Bathub will be driven into extinction for the exact same reason. But how to represent a loss of this magnitude? In the environmental humanities, we often talk about how to mourn for the loss of place, environment, geological era; what would it mean, for example, to mourn for the Holocene, the epoch that gave birth to mankind? On a smaller scale, how does a people articulate what it means to lose home, culture, community—all the situated connectivities and intimately known places that encompass lived inhabitation?

As the film embodies climate change and impending extinction with the aurochs, it also embodies the loss of community and place in the slow death of Wink, Hushpuppy's father. By encapsulating the loss of cosmos in Wink, Hushpuppy's parent, the film comments on what it means to *lose one's maker*. The connections between Wink, the aurochs, and encroaching doom come to fruition barely fifteen minutes into the film when Wink has mysteriously disappeared and left Hushpuppy on her own. Just as she thinks, "If daddy don't get back soon, it's gonna be time for me to start eatin' my pets," Wink wanders into the frame in a hospital gown, worn and disheveled.<sup>23</sup> Their interaction deteriorates into a fight, and Wink strikes his child, knocking her to the ground. Angry, she rises and says the worst thing a child can imagine: "I hope you die. And after you die, I go to your grave and eat birthday cake all by myself."<sup>24</sup> Then she strikes Wink over his heart. We hear the thud of her fist echoed by far-off thunder; as Wink falls to the ground, the thunder cracks so loud it is as if the world is being torn asunder. He lies on the ground, holding his heart and twitching. The film cuts to a shot/reverse shot of Hushpuppy's face and fracturing ice caps, repeating these shots three times. Finally, unable to stand the disintegration of

her world and desperate to fix it, Hushpuppy flees with her hands over her ears to find Miss Bathsheba and obtain medicine to heal her father.

The shot/reverse shot of Hushpuppy and the fracturing ice caps links emotional and physical trauma to ecological trauma felt in far-off places—both are embodied, both are intimate, and the layering of shots makes clear that what hangs in the balance of this narrative are *bodies*, the lives of multiple species and beings. As the ice caps fracture, they release the frozen aurochs into the sea, where they melt free, mysteriously alive, and begin to make their way toward the site of the other impending extinction—toward Isle de Jean Charles. At this point, Hushpuppy says one of the most enduring lines of the film: “The whole universe depends on everything fitting together just right,” she says, as we see ice blocks cascade into the sea, “if one piece busts, then the entire universe will get busted.”<sup>25</sup> Then, through the ice, we get a glimpse of the menacing teeth of an aurochs, a haunting threat doubled by an approaching storm.

As the aurochs float toward land, rain pours into Wink and Hushpuppy’s home, and as the blocks of encapsulated aurochs make landfall in the middle of the night, Wink tries to teach his daughter not to be afraid, but when they wake in the morning, everything is underwater. While many viewers may associate the storm in *Beasts* with Katrina because of the media coverage of the event, the storm in the film could just as easily be Hurricane Juan in 1988; Andrew in 1992; Dan in 1999; Lili in 2002; Cindy, Katrina, Denis, or Rita in 2005; Gustav in 2008; Ida in 2009; or Isaac in 2012. Southern Louisiana is in the midst of physical, emotional, and political storms too numerous to count or withstand. The community of straggling survivors comes together to rebuild what they can, but the reality is that once saltwater inundates fertile land, very little can survive.

Although they ultimately symbolize extinction, the aurochs are also confusingly linked to the apathy and racism that have created the situation in Isle de Jean Charles. As the storm that threatens their survival rages overhead and Wink finally admits his illness to his daughter, Hushpuppy says, “Strong animals got no mercy.”<sup>26</sup> The film cuts to a shot of the aurochs eating one of their own, and then immediately afterward, the people of the Bathtub are forcibly removed and sent to a shelter in what proves to be a problematic sequence for many reviewers of the film. Film critic Geoffrey O’Brien writes,

The rescuers figure as a malevolent intrusive force even though we haven't been given a clear reason to see them that way. It may be well that flood victims suffering from the effects of exposure and hunger would want nothing more than to escape from the shelter where they are receiving food and medical care in order to return to their flooded homes, but Zeitlin does not do much of anything to show why.

A shot of Hushpuppy in the disaster center wearing an anachronistic *Little House on the Prairie*-style dress evokes the notion of the wild child "civilized" by well-meaning missionaries . . . but the moments when she and the other Bathtub residents flee . . . are the least effectively realized in the movie.<sup>27</sup>

O'Brien is right that Zeitlin doesn't sufficiently explain why the residents of the Bathtub feel trapped. He also conflates forcible removal with "rescue," and they are not the same thing. bell hooks agrees with O'Brien about this sequence and how it reinforces what she calls the "conservative agenda" of the film. When she writes about the "feral animal nature" of the people of the Bathtub, she finishes by adding, "They are to resist domestication and civilization at all costs."<sup>28</sup>

I agree that the shelter sequence of the film is messy and conflicted—much of the film is. The scene raises uncomfortable questions about whether making a beautiful movie about poor people romanticizes poverty (one of hooks's concerns) and further asks what we owe to those dispossessed by climate change. How do we balance a community's right to independence and self-determination with relief efforts and what does that look like? And yet through their word choices, both O'Brien and hooks sense the long and fraught indigenous history that influenced the film's creation via location. Forcibly removed like many indigenous children before her and restrained from rejoining her father, Hushpuppy appears in the following shot framed by a doorway, wearing the "anachronistic *Little House on the Prairie*-style dress" O'Brien describes. Visually, this one shot echoes the countless before-and-after photographs from the Indian boarding school era. With Hushpuppy's hair "tamed," her culture and life "tamed," with this one shot Zeitlin invokes the long history of indigenous forced removal and assimilation, compulsory absorption into a capitalist wage economy, and the attempt to erase indigenous cosmologies.

The parallel narrative of the aurochs culminates in the final moment when Wink is dying and Hushpuppy confronts an aurochs face-to-face—fittingly shot on the day of the BP Horizon disaster. As 134 million to 176 million gallons of oil began to pour into the gulf (the final number is still debated), Hushpuppy turns to face an approaching Aurochs as her father and what is left of her community watch.<sup>29</sup> It snorts in her face, breathing her in as she stands still, resolute. Then the camera cuts to a far shot, and we can see how tiny and small she is compared to the creature. Inexplicably, the Aurochs kneels before her as she says, “You’re my friend, kind of,”<sup>30</sup> acknowledging that they both face the same kind of tragedy; and watching this scene, knowing that it was filmed while what well-known journalist and climate change writer Naomi Klein notes is “the largest environmental disaster in United States history” was unfolding creates an eerie resonance.<sup>31</sup> A crew member, Ray Tintori, commented that afterward it “felt like making a film in a war zone.”<sup>32</sup> Starting on that day, everyone in the gulf confronted the environmental hubris that has fueled climate change and the real-life apocalypse for the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw. Tragically substantiating Zeitlin’s allegory of extinction, multiple species began to wash up onto shores in the region, struggling while covered in oil, or already dead.

The BP Horizon disaster showed us all as a nation—in real time—the price of our national resource pleonexia. It proved that some communities are more expendable than others. Some species may not survive our desire for increasing reserves of endless energy, and like any of the hundreds of thousands of marine species and the hundreds of mammals, reptiles, and birds dependent on them, the people of Isle de Jean Charles may go extinct, too. Their interdependence renders them fragile, unable to “adapt” quite quickly enough.

Their rights are those of any other nonhuman beings or beasts in our world of narrowly defined wealth and life—none at all.

## Isle de Jean Charles

Because many in modern society do not understand intimate connections with place as fundamental ties to being and identity, the losses experienced by communities like the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw are often ignored—or, worse, turned back on the community itself, betraying a five-hundred-year-old practice in the Americas of blaming

indigenous peoples for their situations because they are “backward,” “savage,” or “uncivilized.” Indeed, this long-worn narrative of savagery contributes to the animalization of specific communities. Zeitlin experienced this narrative firsthand; when he told his friends and family that he was moving to southern Louisiana, he says many of them replied, “Why would you go there? They shouldn’t rebuild that place; it’s sinking. No one should live there. It’s *irresponsible*.”<sup>33</sup> This kind of response—blaming those who live there for a situation they did not create—betrays a larger, societal lack of understanding of cosmopolitics, the political forces of colonization and subsequent subjugation (still active today), and even the price of our societal greed for endless energy. Living on the isle was never a “choice.” And unfortunately, by being less than clear about the history of this place and its people in the film, Zeitlin enabled many well-known reviewers and critics to completely ignore the political reality of the landscape flashing across their screens when discussing the film as well.

In *Stolen Glimpses, Captive Shadows*, film critic Geoffrey O’Brien, who was mentioned earlier, writes that when watching *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, “we are outside history, outside sociology, caught up straight away in the territories toward which Huck Finn lit out or in the swamp at the end of the mind, a messy profusion of things, unconstrained by laws or walls, reliant on ancient prophecies and herbal cures, at home with the water that may overwhelm them at any moment.”<sup>34</sup> He goes on to comment, “They are us, these survivors, because what Katrina and other hurricanes did to the Gulf Coast can be taken as a foreshadowing of worse to come.”<sup>35</sup> Well, yes, in a manner of speaking—but also emphatically *no*. It is true that we need to deal with the realities of climate change and that what is happening to the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw will, eventually, come for us all in one form or another, whether through fierce storms, drought, floods, or oppressive heat. But it is also true that some, because of history, environmental racism, and politics, will have to face the realities of climate change much sooner than others. Many communities already are.

But you would only know that, of course, if your relationship to place was a historically complicated one, layered by hundreds of years of emplacement and imperiled by colonialism. Writing about *Whale Rider*, Joni Adamson notes, “Every time the island is featured in the background of a scene, the intimate, thousand-year-old relation of the

Maori to the whale is reiterated.”<sup>36</sup> The scenery, the gulf, the seafood, and even some of the extras in the film perform the same kind of work in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*. Emplacement, with all its attendant interspecies interconnectivity, haunts every shot, dominates every frame. Although the film has magical components, it is steeped in a very real landscape and politics of place. In fact, looking at Isle de Jean Charles on Google Maps right now and slowly zooming out gives a good vision of exactly where, in relation to the rest of America, the isle resides—metaphorically and almost literally outside, marooned in a sea of small islands quickly disappearing beneath water.

Enduring a long history of environmental injustice, exclusion, and discrimination, the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw were driven into the bayou by the Indian Removal Act of 1830, where they have been since.<sup>37</sup> As tribal chief Albert Naquin writes in 2013 to the federal government, “We have been running for our lives and finally about 180 years ago we settled in a small area where fishing and farming was good. Also, a great hiding place . . . from the government soldiers.”<sup>38</sup> The Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw resisted the removal programs known as the Trails of Tears by moving into the bayou and out of reach of the federal government; it was not a “choice.” There, they intermarried with French and other indigenous peoples to create what their website calls a “Cultural Gumbo,” continuing in intimate relation with land and place for over 185 years.<sup>39</sup> Over time, their community grew, but in the past twenty years, their numbers have slowly and then precipitously declined. As the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw public relations officer, Babs Roaming Buffalo Bagwell wrote on a blog for the *Huffington Post* in 2013: “Once a secluded Tribal Island community with 300 plus inhabitants, we now have been reduced to 25 homes and 70 inhabitants.”<sup>40</sup> When I began writing this article in 2015, the isle, which was once five by twelve miles, was less than two miles long and a quarter of a mile wide.<sup>41</sup> How did this happen?

The answer is complex, and the causes are multiple: river-diversion projects, oil-extraction and oil-production infrastructure, and climate change. Soil erosion in the area began with the river-control measures built in the 1920s by the Army Corps of Engineers to protect the city of New Orleans from flooding, diverting the river and preventing the sedimentary load from accruing to produce more marsh- and pasture-land. Shortly thereafter, companies began to construct oil rigs as well as

the necessary canals and channels for transporting crude to refineries in the gulf. The first oil rig built near Isle de Jean Charles was erected in 1948, unleashing a torrent of oil-infrastructure production that has seemingly never ceased, and it is important to understand that when a canal is dredged for an oil pipeline, the marshland never recovers. Instead, canals allow saltwater into freshwater areas, slowly killing the surrounding marshland and all the species that depend on it through increased salinity, making way for yet more water. In effect, the two measures to manipulate nature in southern Louisiana worked in tandem with tragic consequences: while the river-diversion measures prevented sediment from accruing to create new marsh- and pastureland, the oil canals decimated the already-fragile ecosystem, turning a fertile and fecund landscape into open sea. As a result, Louisiana is the fastest-disappearing landmass on earth.<sup>42</sup> In the past century, it has lost over two thousand square miles, or a landmass the size of Manhattan *each year*. Many Americans don't know this, but the entire state is experiencing "one of the greatest environmental and economic disasters in the nation's history . . . rushing toward a catastrophic conclusion in the next 50 years," according to Bob Marshall, investigative journalist for the *Lens*, a leading newspaper in New Orleans.<sup>43</sup>

Even Marshall, however, well versed as he is in the oil-production politics of the state, could not have foreseen the BP Horizon disaster. After April 20, 2010, many residents of Isle de Jean Charles volunteered for the Vessels of Opportunity Program sponsored by BP to help clean up the oil further threatening their homelands; but in a twist that would be ironic but for the endemic environmental racism the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw have experienced, many of them were sprayed from the sky with Corexit.<sup>44</sup> BP sprayed 1.3 million gallons of the controversial chemical dispersant into the gulf in the following days with little to no knowledge of how it would ultimately affect the ecosystem.<sup>45</sup> Thus, in the wake of the BP Horizon disaster, the environmental injustices inflicted on the isle were multiplied: their bodies are now doubly at risk from oil and Corexit; their food supply further damaged, diminished, or inedible; and their lands polluted once again. Since then, multiple studies have been released on the effects of Corexit on marine ecology, but it will take some time before its effects on human biology can be fully known—if scientists ever get around to truly studying it. Perhaps, like some of the fish, the bodies of the people



of Isle de Jean Charles will fill with tumors; perhaps, like the plankton, they will simply die.

As a whole, the devastation caused by oil infrastructure to Louisiana cannot be underestimated. The region supports “half of the nation’s oil refineries, a matrix of pipelines that serve 90 percent of the nation’s offshore energy production and 30 percent of its total oil and gas supply.”<sup>46</sup> If you live in America, you are dependent on this very oil infrastructure for your lifestyle and thus complicit in what is happening to the people of Isle de Jean Charles and all the other poor communities in the region—though not by choice. The erosion could have been prevented entirely, because oil companies were supposed to backfill canals with rock and then with sediment to ensure that the fragile marshland, which provides a storm buffer for the entire state, was not damaged, but they failed to do so.<sup>47</sup> In 2013 the Southeast Louisiana Flood Protection Authority filed suit against ninety-seven oil companies for the damage they have caused; according to their permits, they were to “return” the areas to “original condition.”<sup>48</sup> As a result of human interference, what took nature “7000 thousand years to build” will be “destroyed in a human lifetime.”<sup>49</sup> Now add climate change to that—experts at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration predict that the sea-level rise in this part of the country could be as high as a little over one meter (4.3 feet); the 2013 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change estimates about one meter (3.6 feet); but climatologist James Hansen’s paper on the subject, ratified in 2016, shows that it could be two to five meters (or 6–15 feet)<sup>50</sup>—with increasingly fierce storms and hurricanes, and the already-fragile ecosystem along with its human inhabitants live under constant assault. In short, what we can witness in real time in Louisiana is how environmental racism, corporate exploitation and irresponsibility, and climate change caused the people of Isle de Jean Charles to become the first climate change refugees in America.

They will not be the last.

## Stories of Emplacement

But *Beasts of the Southern Wild* does not end its narrative with fear and extinction. Throughout, and from its very first frames, *Beasts* attempts to redefine “beast” by arguing that the entire world is alive and intercon-

nected, posing an environmental ethic that, if taken more seriously in American culture, would complicate an environmental racism that uses speciesist ideologies to enact injustice. This nonspeciesist environmental ethic begins in the very the first frames as Hushpuppy listens to the heartbeats of the animals around her and muses that nature talks “in code.”<sup>51</sup> Shortly thereafter, her father declares that it is “feed up time!” and all the animals, including Hushpuppy, rush to the meal. “Share with the dog,” Wink instructs his daughter, as we hear the sounds of multiple mammals masticating.<sup>52</sup> During these scenes, we see the living conditions of Hushpuppy and her father, and we (should) understand that they are far from ideal or romantic. They live in poverty. It isn’t pretty. But we also understand that Hushpuppy and her father must live in cooperation with the animals and ecology around them in order to survive. If they break this cooperation, they put their own lives at risk.

The message that the humans in the film are part of a delicate ecological chain occurs again as Miss Bathsheba teaches the children that they are all meat and again at the end of the scene I analyze earlier where Zeitlin first layers in shots of the fracturing ice caps. At the conclusion of this sequence where Hushpuppy and her father fight, she flees to obtain medicine, but when she returns, she finds that Wink is gone. She muses, “Daddy could have turned into a tree or a bug, there wasn’t any way to know. The whole universe depends on everything fitting together just right.”<sup>53</sup> Hushpuppy’s idea that Wink could have become “a tree or a bug” seems childish but actually asserts what we already know to be true: the entire world is a vast recycling of energy and matter, and every piece depends on every other. The film illustrates this idea further after the storm, when everything is underwater. Miss Bathsheba (the voice of truth and reason in the film) says, “Everything beautiful is gone. Man, you know they got plenty of salt in that water that ate everything up. Trees are gonna die first, then the animals, then the fish.”<sup>54</sup> And she is right; shortly afterward, everything begins to die.

When you talk to the people of Isle de Jean Charles, listen to interviews, or watch the several small documentary films about their community, what you encounter over and over is the struggle to articulate the slow dyings, the loss of everything around them, which comes out of their narrative in jagged pieces: the protracted decay of large trees, in their yards and on the land around them; fish washing up in hoards on shore or caught alive but filled with tumors; oyster beds disappear-

ing; shrimp that are scarce and then that they are told they shouldn't eat because they are now contaminated; entire islands full of dead, poisoned birds; a scattered community, with a fracturing culture; the fear that the next storm will be the big storm, the storm they might not be able to outrun and get off the island in time, the storm after which they might come home to absolutely nothing at all but open water. What you hear is their inability to articulate the full scope of what is happening to them, their struggle to reckon with an apocalyptic end, the literal dissolution of everything they have ever known. Like the film, they too place themselves within a continuum, a piece of a much larger whole. The film carries through its attempt to redefine the "beasts" of the title, arguing instead that we are all beasts, all linked by delicate threads to all other living beings around us.

For some, the attempt to revise the word "beast" as a commentary on emplacement and cosmopolitics isn't overt enough and, instead, contributes to the romanticization and fantasy aspects of the narrative. Writes bell hooks, "In this world there is no us-against-them mentality when it comes to human and nature. Instead, there is an intimate merger"; she labels this merger a "ridiculous macabre fantasy of modern primitivism."<sup>55</sup> She goes on: "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."<sup>56</sup> Obviously, I agree with hooks that *Beasts of the Southern Wild* articulates a worldview in which there is an intimate merger between people and place, as Zeitlin found in his work with the communities surrounding Isle de Jean Charles. I also think she is right to worry that some will see the poverty in the film and the magical realism contained by the narrative of the aurochs as a romanticization of their situation, and of course I agree with her about the race-based politics of domination. It is powerful to argue that we are all beasts, just one species of many, without special rights or privileges, and yet this very same ethic and the lifeways through which it is cultivated contribute to the animalization of these very communities. However, hooks overlooks the American Indian history and political reality of the film altogether, focusing instead on the race of the actors as indicative of the situation the film depicts. In the end, *Beasts of the Southern Wild* argues that this community, these particular "beasts," are being pushed into extinction by a complex web of

petropolitics, apathy, our culture's insistence that we can control nature, and our belief that animals are subordinate, pathetic, and powerless beings with no intrinsic worth in their own right, and certainly with no *rights*. It may be a messy piece of art and, for some, a flawed attempt to redefine the ideology used to justify what is happening to the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw, but at least it tries with humility and, I think, no small measure of success.

I wish there were an easy solution to the situation facing the people of Isle de Jean Charles. The fact is, there isn't much we can do to combat the tragedy already in process, but we can learn from it, socially, culturally, politically, and ecologically. The Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw applied to the state government, requesting protection under the proposed Morganza levee project, but were told they would not be protected by the construction. As the director of the Terrebonne Levee and Conservation District said to a reporter for the *New York Times*, "The problem is, based on the cost-benefit ratio, it would cost too much to include that sliver of land. For the cost, *you could buy the island and all the residents tenfold*."<sup>57</sup> The conflation in the director's comment—the land and its people are equally worthless—should be shocking, but it is not surprising. As Julie Maldonado, an anthropologist who worked for the US National Climate Assessment program, writes, "The political decisions that determine who gains and loses from such cost-benefit analyses . . . need to be critically considered to understand the underlying implications for who is being sacrificed for the greater common good."<sup>58</sup> The Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw might have sued the state for the right to be included within the borders of the Morganza levee, but at the time, they were applying for federal recognition from the Bureau of Indian Affairs and were fearful that suing the state would damage the chance of their application being approved. Construction of the Morganza levee was approved in 2007 and began shortly thereafter; the tribe's application for federal recognition was denied in May of 2008. When I began writing this in 2015, their land was all but gone, and their tribal chief said it was time for everyone to move off the isle. Then, in January of 2016, the Department of Housing and Urban Development announced that they would give \$48 million dollars to the Isle de Jean Charles—the first grant of its kind in the world—to relocate their entire community, about sixty residents.<sup>59</sup> The community website notes their hope that the new settlement "will become a living model of commu-

nity cultural resilience, disaster and climate change mitigation, green building practices, environmental stewardship, and sustainable economic development,”<sup>60</sup> and the Lowland Center’s Coastal Resettlement project shows the full plans for the community, illustrating their dedication to helping the tribe maintain traditional lifeways through sustainable design.<sup>61</sup> The offer to resettle has not been greeted with full support by all the people of Isle de Jean Charles, however. Resettlement will be voluntary, and some declare they will remain.<sup>62</sup>

The situation of the isle illustrates both what is possible (cooperative, sustainable relocation) and also how ill equipped we are as a nation to meet the needs of climate change refugees on a vast scale, which is what we are facing. An estimated 123 million Americans live in coastal areas, and if James Hansen’s research team’s prediction that we will experience a sea-level rise of *six to fifteen feet* before 2100 is accurate, we face a refugee crisis so enormous in scale that it almost eludes comprehension. In addition, in the United States, indigenous rights regarding climate change justice and legislation are complicated, because although they are sovereign nations, they cannot themselves enact climate change legislation or partake in international accords. They must concede to the United States’ national position on such matters. However, they do have some power under the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which notes that the “involuntary relocation of indigenous peoples,” by climate change or otherwise, is “a serious human rights issue” and must be dealt with accordingly.<sup>63</sup> How we plan to deal with climate change and its effects on indigenous communities is a matter we must tackle now. Worldwide, indigenous peoples are disproportionately affected, and in helping their communities, we could both ascertain how to best prepare for approaching ecological crises and learn from alternative cultural frameworks about what Kimmerer describes as “the responsibility that flows between humans and the earth.”<sup>64</sup>

We know with certainty that the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw will not be the last climate change refugees in America. Hushpuppy is right that the world does actually depend on “everything fitting together” and that no being on planet Earth will remain unaffected by climate change. What is happening to Isle de Jean Charles and several other indigenous communities around the world sounds the alarm for what is coming for us all. If we do not attend to the problem of ecological dispossession and dislocation before it begins to affect society at large,

we will have shown, yet again, not only that our historical mistreatment of American Indian peoples extends well into the twenty-first century but also how desperately myopic we are as a nation. Currently, we have no national plans, policies, or monies to alleviate the suffering of communities fighting climate change—a community must first be virtually destroyed to qualify for relief funds. This is patently absurd, yet another moment where our politics have not caught up to our reality.

In addition, we have to change our cultural behavior and be more emphatic than ever that the human/nature binary is ridiculous and, as we can see from the ecological stress all around us, incredibly damaging. Writers often use the words “adaptation” and “extinction” when talking about these communities and their cultures, and when they do so, they use the words as scientists define them in terms of selective evolution. Can these communities adapt in time? In fact, “adaptation” is used with astonishing frequency by writers who consider themselves allies of the people of Isle de Jean Charles and write to draw attention to their plight, but this word choice is deceptive, because it hides all the factors contributing to the loss of place for the people of Isle de Jean Charles—including the diversion and engineering of the Mississippi River, the building of levees and dams, the dredging of canals by petrocorporations, and the sea-level rise caused by the burning of fossil fuels—behind mere biology, a happenstance of natural processes, instead of the political forces enacting genocide through a manufactured ecological crisis. To fight this rhetoric, there is an opportunity for environmental justice to become more proactive by expanding the list of its concerns beyond racism, classism, and sexism—or beyond the merely human—to include speciesism, which would work to prevent an environmental racism that co-opts speciesism to further its cause. After all, what is applied to nonhuman bodies often extends to human bodies as well.

Insisting that we recognize other species and the “more than human” as having rights and being worthy of respect is precisely the work of demanding a real-world cosmopolitics, a political process that takes into account that other peoples have differing notions of how the earth works and thus differing notions of how humans must live in relation to it. In turn, we can learn a lot from cultures that have maintained close relationships with the ecologies surrounding them. We live in a time where this project could not be more pressing, as overpopulation, cli-

mate change, and ecological instability position more human communities as equally disposable as the nonhuman species quickly disappearing from our planet.

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