INTRODUCTION

Horse

The Negro is America's metaphor.

—Richard Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Writing"

The very first paragraph of Frederick Douglass's 1845 autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass,* presents us with a claim that leaps off the page as a problem for modern thought. One rooted in an altogether improper adjacency given the conventions and central aims of the slave narrative as a form, that is, to serve as black humanity's literary proof. Douglass writes, "I was born in Tuckahoe, near Hillsborough, and about twelve miles from Easton, in Talbot County, Maryland. I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it. By far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs."[1] This moment of all-too-fraught proximity between the enslaved black person and the nonhuman animal—positioned here as *twin* captives, affixed by modernity's long arc—demands our attention. What Douglass names is a kinship forged

in the midst of unthinkable violence, kinship born of mutual subjugation, yes, but also the shared experience of opacity mistaken for emptiness. Here, Douglass foregrounds animal perspective as a means to convey the impossibility of personal history for the enslaved. A slave's past cannot be recalled because there is no socially recognized, generally honored means by which to recall it—no system to record one's emergence into the world, one's entry into the proper chronology, and cosmology, of the human.

Yet one could also argue that Douglass is gesturing toward a deep sense of commonality and even comradeship here. Though the horse is certainly a representative of what is lost, it is also an unlikely ally, one that shares the experience of existing both inside and outside the parameters of plantation time. The horse is a creature that likewise has no narrative of origin—no chronological orientation outside its relationship to the slaver's clock—and is thus also constantly moving between the realm of organism and machine, between occupying a space of self-determination and being configured as a *living commodity*. In this sense, horses are, for Douglass, a bridge par excellence between the human and nonhuman realms. They are saleable, living beings, not unlike Douglass and his kin, that are certainly used for labor, entertainment, and breeding but also possess an interiority that is, by the rule, denied.

Douglass forges this unexpected alliance to set up a line of argument that he follows intently throughout the text, a means of getting out of animality *by going through it*. Douglass understands, for example, that under the system of chattel slavery, there are structures in place for the care and sustenance of animals that simply do not exist for the enslaved. As a result, in many of the initial scenes involving horses in Douglass's narrative, there is a

confluence of complex emotions: empathy and envy, pity, love, resentment and outright rage. Douglass is aware of this unwieldy network of feelings that bind livestock and the enslaved together, and he appears to wrestle at various points with the sadness that emerges from living in such fraught proximity: the contradictions implicit in being asked to care for a creature that is, on many occasions, granted more freedom, and more room to move, than oneself. During a speech delivered in 1873 in Nashville, Tennessee, entitled "Agriculture and Black Progress," Douglass takes this point a bit further: "Not only the slave, but the horse, the ox, and the mule shared the general feeling of indifference to rights naturally engendered by a state of slavery. . . . The master blamed the overseer; the overseer the slave, and the slave the horses, oxen, and mules; and violence and brutality fell upon animals as a consequence."[2] Douglass goes on to entreat his listeners at the time—an audience composed primarily of recently emancipated black farmers—to consider animals their co-laborers, friends, partners in the field, to resist the whims of a social order predicated on their confinement and instead embrace another, more radical form of sociality, one grounded in the desire for a world without cages or chains.

In this sense and others, Douglass's horse embodies the central concerns of this book. The argument of *Being Property Once Myself: Blackness and the End of Man* is that the overarching claims Douglass is making can be found throughout the African American literary tradition. That is, rather than triumphalist rhetoric that would eschew the nonhuman altogether, what we often find instead are authors who envision the Animal as a source of unfettered possibility, or, to call on the work of John Berger, the Animal as a *promise*.[3] And what does the Animal promise, exactly?

What do black authors create when they are willing to engage in a critical embrace of what has been used against them as a tool of derision and denigration, to leap into a vision of human personhood rooted not in the logics of private property or dominion but in wildness, flight, brotherhood and sisterhood beyond blood?

This book is composed of five chapters, each of which tracks a specific animal figure—the rat, the cock, the mule, the dog, and the shark—in the works of several twentieth- and twenty-first-century writers: Richard Wright, Toni Morrison, Zora Neale Hurston, Jesmyn Ward, and Robert Hayden, respectively. I argue that animal figures are deployed in these texts to assert a theory of black sociality and *black feeling,* as well as to combat certain foundational claims within the Western philosophical tradition broadly construed. My goal throughout this work is to illumine the ways in which the black aesthetic tradition provides us with the tools needed to conceive of interspecies relationships anew and ultimately to abolish the forms of antiblack thought that have maintained the fissure between human and animal. For this too is what W. E. B. Du Bois might have us think of as *the gift* of black culture, the gift of blackness: the great chain of being come undone, life itself unfettered and moving in all directions, a window into the worlds that thrive at the underside of modernity. What does the Animal promise? Nothing short of another cosmos. A radically different set of relations is possible. As Douglass and others demonstrate, such an order is already here, already in the works, already waiting for us in the wild.

This book focuses on the literary imagination and the broader set of ethical concerns that have emerged from African American experiences of living as sociolegal *nonpersons:* a subgenre of the human, always already positioned in fraught proximity to animal

life. Its title is a loving riff on the first two lines of the untitled Lucille Clifton poem that starts off her 1972 collection *Good News about the Earth:*

> being property once myself
> i have a feeling for it,
> that's why i can talk
> about environment.
> what wants to be a tree,
> ought to be he can be it.
> same thing for other things.
> same thing for men.[4]

And who is this good news for, exactly? Probably those who know bad news all too well, those who recognize this offer of a world in which one can refashion the self at will, find kin among (living) things, and claim a vision of human personhood rooted not in ownership but rather in the desire for recognition and care, as a world that many of us are still waiting on. As is Clifton in so much of her work, I am interested in the ongoing entanglement of blackness and animality in black social, civic, and psychic life, moments when black people and nonhuman animals are forced to live in too-close quarters, physical (the plantation, the wilderness, the kitchenette overrun with pests), legal (the coterminous valuation and sale of animals and slaves during chattel slavery), or otherwise. In the midst of such systemic dehumanization, what new ways of thinking about personhood have emerged? How have black authors cultivated a poetics of persistence and interspecies empathy, a literary tradition in which nonhuman—and thus also, ostensibly, nonthinking—life forms are acting up and out in ways we might not expect or yet have a language for?

For instance, how do we configure Countee Cullen's historically ignored pair of children's books, both coauthored with his cat, Christopher, within the African American literary tradition?[5] What do we make of Henry Bibb's explicit, outspoken jealousy of the freedoms (to take flight, to move freely, to resist capture) that are enjoyed by snakes and birds but unavailable to the enslaved?[6] These texts supply us with scenes that are difficult to incorporate into any triumphalist approach to post-Emancipation black literatures and force us instead to grapple with a different set of questions around what the historical proximity of black people and nonhuman animals means for how we should read bestial presence in African American letters.

Though the animating questions of this book can be found long before the publication of many of the twentieth-century texts that constitute its core, it is nonetheless in the writings of theorists such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Gwendolyn Brooks, Jean Toomer, and others that the intersections I hope to map find their most robust expression. For example, it is Du Bois's theorization of black persons as *tertium quid,* "somewhere between men and cattle, . . . a clownish, simple creature, at times even lovable within its limitations, but straitly foreordained to walk within the Veil," that motivates much of my ongoing interest in thinking of black lives as those that are often positioned outside the human-animal divide altogether and placed elsewhere in a zone of nonbeing where the kinds of extravagant violence so often deployed against, and solely reserved for, animals is made allowable, deemed necessary in order for white civil society to function at peak performance.[7] The nature of this dual bind—that is, the historical experience of being configured as a not-quite-nonhuman form of life, indeed, as a *human*

nonperson—as well as the body of literature that emerges from within that confinement, is this study's primary concern.

Put differently, this project emerges from the uneasy collision of mourning and celebration, and derives its force from the meditative tenacity of authors willing to turn to the animal kingdom, that which had so often been used as a tool of their derision and punishment, as a site of futurity and fugitivity. This is a refusal rooted in the knowledge that, as Audre Lorde reminds us, "we were never meant to survive." Not only a celebration in spite of antiblack structures of feeling, or a capitalist order predicated on the wanton destruction of nonhuman forms of life, but a kind that employs those conditions as the very grounds for a divergent mode of being in the world.[8] If black people and animals are co-constructed as living flesh but never as *bodies,* then what protective protocols might black authors have cultivated to celebrate the flesh, to love it as Baby Suggs, herself a physically disabled field hand who is characterized at one point in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* as "a sixty-odd-year-old slavewoman who walks like a three-legged dog," implores us to?[9] Often, I will argue, loving blackness comes at a high price and is almost always linked to a refutation of the human as the only form of life worthy of mourning or ethical engagement.

What these authors appear to be seeking, alongside the space to be properly grieved—which is to say, to be recognized as not already dead in every way that matters—is a vision of life that is profoundly *ecological,* one that takes place in a social field made up of dynamic relationships not predicated solely on domination or exploitation. In this sense, their work is extending and elaborating on what Michel Serres has termed, in contradistinction to a social

contract, a *natural contract,* a way of imagining interplay across species that foregrounds "symbiosis and reciprocity," a contract "in which our relationship to things would set aside mastery and possession in favor of admiring attention, reciprocity, contemplation, and respect: where knowledge would no longer imply property, nor action mastery."[10] Through a collective envisioning of the natural contract that doubles as a theory of blackness—which is also to say, a theory of gender and a theory of *genre*—these authors open up space for something like a fundamentally *black ecology,* an explosion of the limits imposed by a disciplinary or otherwise aversion to thinking with nonhuman forms of life at the level of the psychic, the literary, and the sociopolitical.[11]

I will argue that it is precisely this commitment to engaging with the fullness of nonhuman animal worlds, as well as a profound wrestling with what it means to live in a social matrix in which one is cast as a lower order of organism, that demands sustained critical attention. Such a history begs the question, How does one delight in a precarious life? What useful blues might we find in an archive full of folks forced to write against perpetual misrecognition? My argument will be that these authors, writing as they are against centuries of dehumanizing discourse made material in law, literature, and various instances of everyday inequality, are able to articulate a set of ethics, and what is more, a philosophy of mind, that is instructive for those of us interested in thinking toward a more robust vision of human, and nonhuman, cognitive and otherwise potential in the contemporary moment. By engaging in extensive close readings of the scenes in which nonhuman animals appear in twentieth- and twenty-first-century African American literature, I hope to expound on the counterhegemonic, and also seemingly *counterintuitive,* ways that black

authors often render animal life in their poetry and fiction. I am primarily interested in how animal figures are deployed therein in order to make arguments about the nature of black sociality, black interiority, and *black feeling*, as well as to combat certain foundational claims within the Western philosophical tradition regarding the limits and lacunae of personhood broadly construed.

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

There are few scholars who have pulled these divergent, and largely nascent, fields together for the purposes of a larger project. Nevertheless, there are a number of contemporary theorists with whom this book is in direct conversation, including Fred Moten, Hortense Spillers, Evie Shockley, Kimberly N. Ruffin, Ian Finseth, Paul Outka, Zakkiyah Jackson, Camille Dungy, and Michael Lundblad. Each of these thinkers' work reflects a robust engagement across both field and genre that this book seeks to emulate, especially as it pertains to unsettling familiar categories (for example, "the animal" or "the body"). In the current landscape of literary

theory, this book is entering much-larger conversations currently taking place around new materialisms, animal ethics, and the intractability of antiblack violence in our historical moment. In that vein, several academic texts have recently been released that accomplish something like the transversal analysis of antiblackness and animalization that I am interested in pursuing in this book. Spanning genre and period, each of these texts stands in one way or another as a cogent critique of the ways in which these connections have heretofore been mapped in animal studies, ecocriticism, and black studies alike.

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

Kimberley N. Ruffin's *Black on Earth: African American Literary Connections* and Michael Lundblad's *Birth of a Jungle: Animality in Progressive Era U.S. Literature and Culture* approach the gap in the literary historical archive much differently than *Black Nature* does,

both relying primarily on a combination of literary fiction and historical materials to make their cases, respectively, for (1) rethinking the historical relationship between black thinkers and US American ecological discourse and (2) forging a line of flight away from something like animal studies in order to engage in what Lundblad terms *animality studies,* an intellectual project centrally concerned with the ways in which certain kinds of organic life become animalized through law and literature.

Another text that is in direct conversation with this book is Marjorie Spiegel's controversial book *The Dreaded Comparison: Human and Animal Slavery,* which focuses primarily on the sites of overlap between chattel slavery in the Americas in the seventeenth century and what she terms *animal slavery:* the ongoing capture and slaughter of nonhuman animals worldwide for the sake of human consumption, recreation, and profit. Though I am interested in many of the same *historical* intersections as Spiegel is, my ultimate aim is not to place chattel slavery and the exploitation of nonhuman animals side by side as a means of highlighting the ostensibly undertheorized plight of nonhuman animals so much as to investigate the ways in which animal life operates as a site of recognition and reckoning for African American authors in the twentieth century and beyond.

Where this book will differ from these existing works is that my earliest objects of inquiry are firmly situated within the confines of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. I imagine this project as the next step in a logical progression from many of the texts I have outlined herein not only in the sense of chronology but also at the level of genre. I also want to note that while there are other books and articles that take up the relationship between black people and the natural world as their subject matter, there

are none I have come across that pay extensive attention to the specific set of relations that interest me, that is, the ways in which literary encounters between black folks and various forms of animal life in twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature provide us with alternative models for thinking blackness and personhood *as such* in the present day.

Finally, I want to note that the subtitle of this book, *Blackness and the End of Man,* is an inheritance from the Jamaican theorist, playwright, dancer, poet, and novelist Sylvia Wynter. Directly in line with the larger sociopolitical, and semiotic, problem of Man as an *overrepresentation of the human,* I have attempted here to offer an alternative vision of the human through the lens of black literary studies. My argument throughout this book is that the vision of personhood offered by various writers in the black aesthetic tradition represents a response to both a Hegelian account of personhood, in which "the person has for its substantive end the right of placing its will in any and every thing,"[12] and to a variant of personhood established and enforced by contemporary jurisprudence, in which "not every human being is necessarily a person, for a person is capable of rights and duties, and there may well be human beings having no legal rights, as was the case with slaves in English law. . . . A person is such not *because he is human,* but because rights and duties are ascribed to him."[13]

For those who have historically not been able to, or simply not *desired* to, exert their will in things but have instead had to count themselves as both among and *as infinitely more than things,* there have always been other approaches to imagining how they might love and live in their flesh, as well as *what they might call* such living. In response to this lived experience of moving through the material world without the legal rights ascribed to the ostensibly au-

tonomous, rights-bearing, legal person—what Wynter's oeuvre shows us is actually the figure of Man, masquerading as the only viable genre of the human person—African American authors have, from the very beginning, envisioned and enacted alternative ways of being human and thinking human personhood. This book is my attempt to map that fugitive practice, that black love that enters the world in and through and as literary study, as it appears in the figure of the animal. This mapping is inextricable from Wynter's call, especially in her later writings and interviews, for a serious reconsideration of the importance of *origin stories* in the field of black studies and elsewhere.[14]

This book is an initial gesture toward the larger project of reconsidering the origins of the field of black literary studies, as well as a revision and a re-envisioning of the sites at which something like black literary study might be said to take place, what sorts of unwieldy, largely unthought forms of interspecies collaboration, convergence, and conviviality might be involved in such an undertaking. If antiblackness is the weather, as Christina Sharpe writes, then perhaps black study, black sociality, black care, and laughter in our life behind the Veil is our way of moving through it, around it, below it.[15] Perhaps it is, in some sense, our ark, our simultaneous shelter from the storm and vessel bound for elsewhere. What does black thought in the end times, at the End of Man, look like? Strangers gathered in the Clearing, perhaps, to envisage a new way. A loving glance. New language that might honor where we are now, where we have been, and the places we are going that we cannot yet imagine.

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Chapter 1 will focus on the role of rats in the poetry and fiction of Richard Wright. Though Wright's singular focus on the sustained

threat of violent death that permeates black presence in the public sphere—as well as what such an ongoing imposition makes of black interior life and the possibility of black sociality—is undertheorized within contemporary literary theory, what has received even less scholarly attention are the ways in which Wright's commitment to thinking about black death is mediated through the appearance and activity of nonhuman animals, most frequently, and most germane to this chapter, the figure of the pest.[16] Indeed, an abundance of pest animals populate Wright's work, but it is the rat that animates the scenes in his poetry and fiction that most clearly articulate his relationship to black suffering as well as black persistence, its hunger and spirited refusal to be captured that best characterize the way he portrays the persons who are most central to the concerns of this study: Bigger Thomas and the anonymous speaker of his nature haiku. It is my goal, then, through an extended reading of the opening scene of Wright's most famous novel, *Native Son,* to interrogate the way Wright imagines black life through the figure of the pest instead of against it, crafting characters that are consistently under duress but also always in flight, always fugitive from forces seen and unseen that depend on their subjugation for life.

Chapter 2 is centrally concerned with the uses of the black masculine in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*. Therein, I argue, Morrison's emphasis on the presence and, most importantly, the *properties* of animals is notably gendered and provides a fertile ground for imagining a theory of the black masculine grounded in literary analysis. Put differently, I am interested here in the ways in which Morrison uses animals, and birds in particular, to make a certain argument about how it *feels* to be a black man, how she uses them in order not only to critique the limiting, violent ways in which

black masculinity is structured *from the outside* but to describe the means through which black men and boys bear such weight, how they comport themselves under the duress of everyday life as a perceived threat. Following Afaa Weaver's suggestion that "black men are the summary of weight," Chapter 2 tracks the way that black masculinity as heaviness, as excess, as impediment, as vanity, as *exorbitance* moves through *Song of Solomon* in the bodies of birds, how these animals, rather paradoxically, come to signal a certain boundedness to earth, an unwieldy abundance that limits all possibility of mobility, escape, or futurity.[17] Alongside Nahum Chandler and others, however, I would like to think imaginatively about what such exorbitance avails to us as a frame for imagining alternative black masculinities and to begin with the premise of abundance rather than absence.

For the purposes of Chapter 3, I am interested in how Zora Neale Hurston's uses of the figure of the mule might elucidate new pathways for thinking at the intersections of blackness, animality, and gender, how her persistent emphasis on the disparate kinds of violation, silencing, and suppression that circumscribe black women's everyday experiences—especially when such violation is juxtaposed against spectacular scenes of violence against nonhuman animals and explicitly linked to the experience of those animals by the text's central characters—helps us to think not only about muleness as a critical agent in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* but about the mule as a figure of central importance in the field of black feminist thought. Further, in this chapter I seek to illuminate the ways in which a critical engagement with muleness opens up a number of different avenues through which we might approach *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as a part of Hurston's broader corpus, in which bestial presence is always already an irruptive

force to be reckoned with. I intend for this chapter to reflect the inherent *multiplicity* of muleness as a means of indexing value, which is also to say, the indeterminate, uncanny workings of the black feminine in a text that is deeply concerned with how we might read persistence, even abundance, in spaces and, most centrally, onto *forms of human and nonhuman life* that are traditionally marked as nonsites, as vitalized forms of death.[18] It is precisely this critical practice of valuing black and nonhuman life, over and against dominant ways of thinking about or assigning such value, that, I will argue, is what Hurston wants us to consider when muleness enters the frame.

Chapter 4 will focus primarily on the role of dogs in Jesmyn Ward's 2011 novel *Salvage the Bones.* To open, I will undertake a close reading of Carl Philips's poem "White Dog," in an effort to see what happens when the immediate threat of violence is removed from a poem that contains all of the other elements that have heretofore been discussed as mediating factors in the relationship between black people and dogs. I proceed to engage in an extended reading of *Salvage the Bones,* with special emphasis on the ways in which motherhood is marshaled by Ward in order to unsettle normative, anthropocentric modes of imagining kinship and relation more broadly. By crafting a constellation of human and nonhuman actors that are all explicitly marked as mothers, I argue that Ward demands that the reader relinquish the impulse to flatten motherhood into solely a space of nurturing or care and embrace a much more troubled, and troubling, view, one that fully engages with the violence of the natural world, as well as the gratuitous, ostensibly *unnatural* violence imposed by the regulatory forces of a white-supremacist social order.

Chapter 5 explores the uses of sharks in twentieth- and twenty-first-century African American poetry. How does the ever-present specter of the transatlantic slave trade—what we might think of, following Saidiya Hartman and other critics, as the afterlife of slavery—propel us to theorize black ecopoetics not as a matter of *ground* but as an occasion to think at the intersection of terra firma and open sea, surface and benthos, the observable ocean and the uncharted blackness of its very bottom? Given recent critical attention paid to African American nature writing, I am interested in how we might think alongside black writers who have historically taken up oceanic ecology, and their necessarily strained relationship to it, as a central concern. Specifically, in this chapter I will concentrate on the writings of two major twentieth-century African American poets, Robert Hayden and Melvin Tolson, in order to elaborate a theory of black ecopoetics gone offshore. I will undertake this project primarily through investigating the ways that both poets deploy sharks in their writings about the long historical reach of antiblackness as a dominant structure of feeling, as well as the ongoing presence of black persistence and black fugitive possibility.