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Dog

Tie Luther B to that cypress. He gon' be alright.
The dog done been rained on before,
he done been here a day or two hisself before,
and we sho' can't take him. Just leave him
some of that Alpo and plenty of water.
Bowls and bowls of water.
We gon' be back home soon this thing pass over.
Luther B gon' watch the place while we gone.
You heard the man—he said Go' and you know
white folks don't warn us 'bout nothing unless
they scared too. We gon' just wait this storm out.
Then we come on back home. Get our dog.

—Patricia Smith, "Won't Be but a Minute"

Fact is, I trust dogs more than I trust humans.

—DMX, "Grand Champ Intro"

White dogs—which is also to say, dogs that, as a result of those who claim ownership over their flesh and employ it, exploit it toward white-supremacist ends that are more or less inextricable

from hegemonic whiteness as a set of sociopolitical protocols and practices—are ubiquitous within the African American literary tradition and beyond. Even a cursory search of the landscape reveals the uncanny reappearance of these particular animal figures time and time again across genre. From Langston Hughes's "Little Dog," a standout in his undertheorized collection of short stories *The Ways of White Folks,* to Carl Phillips's poem "White Dog" to the pack of bloodhounds that bound across the ice after Eliza in *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* there are white dogs everywhere. White dogs that are not only pets but often extensions of the police state, indeed, the very flesh-and-bone entities through which the murderous whims of the police state are made manifest in the everyday lives of those who are property themselves or else the descendants of property, those who own nothing and as such exist as a threat to the logic of private property altogether. Given this implicit doubleness, that is, the historical role of the dog as both dire threat and dearest companion within the bounds of not only black expressive cultures but also the everyday experiences of black folks forced to live at and as the bottommost portion of US racial caste, how might we devise an approach to reading the presence of dogs in African American letters that undermines the cultural mythos and, indeed, the persistent erasure that allows for the common rendering of the figure of the dog as "man's best friend"? Or, along a slightly different vector, what if we were to linger with that particular formulation that we might unsettle it, might bore down into the thinking that gives such a phrase its coherence in order to expose what is at stake in imagining the sort of biologically determined, automatic kinship it implies, a bond between Man and beast ensured and established at the level of species, the dog as an example par excellence of *being-for-the-master* from the very first, enchained the moment it enters the scene?

If the dog is indeed always and already the closest companion of Man, then what happens in a textual moment or social scene in which Man is jettisoned from our line of sight and we find ourselves in worlds, imagined or otherwise, populated by those who live and love at the margins of the genre of Man, those altogether barred from that category and its varied protections? Stated plainly, how might we work toward a theory of black kinship, black friendship *as a way of life,* to borrow the Foucauldian phrasing—by paying close attention to instances throughout literatures of the African diaspora in which black folks and the dogs with whom they share space are able to complicate, and ultimately subvert, the bourgeois sensibilities that give shape and form to any strict, hierarchical relationship between pet and human master-subject.[1] Following Frantz Fanon's formulation that *the black is not a man*, as well as Sylvia Wynter's claim that the work of black feminism is, from one angle, a collective laboring toward *the end of the genre of Man*, I would like to think about what kinship between humans and dogs can look like when that which ostensibly undergirds the identity of the former is something other than domination or sovereign power—that is, when Man is removed from the equation altogether and those who have been historically barred from that very category enter the frame of study. If we can think of human-dog relationships outside a particular, Linnaean vision of species hierarchy and instead embrace a model akin to what Karen Barad and others might call *entanglement,* then what sort of alternative models for thinking sociality across species become available to us?[2] Put differently, if we are willing to militate toward the abolition of the genre of Man and think companionship anew, outside the familiar dialectics that

structure the relationship between pet and master in the first instance, what rises to the fore in the wake? What beauty? What unthinkable terror?

This chapter will focus primarily on the role of dogs in Jesmyn Ward's 2011 National Book Award–winning novel *Salvage the Bones.* Therein, I argue, we are provided with an especially rigorous foundation for thinking kinship across lines of species via the relationship between the novel's protagonist, Esch; her brother Skeetah; and China, a white pit bull that doubles as both the family pet and the primary breadwinner in Esch and Skeetah's home. Through this doubly defamiliarizing gesture—that is, the positioning of the female dog as the head of the human household—as well as others, including the recoding of dogfighting and the underground spaces in which dogfighting tends to take place, as sites of both black social possibility and singular human-nonhuman intimacy, Ward crafts a universe in which dominant taxonomies are razed to the ground in favor of unruly, unregulated ways of organizing disparate forms of life. I am interested in lingering with these moments of indeterminacy toward the end of imagining, alongside Ward, a more liberating model of interspecies companionship than what is offered within the scope of contemporary animal studies discourse.

By way of opening, I will undertake a close reading of the Carl Phillips poem "White Dog," in an effort to see what happens when the immediate threat of violence is removed from a work that contains many of the other elements that have heretofore been discussed as mediating factors in the relationship between black people and dogs. In the absence of the immediate, looming threat of punishment or violence, how is Phillips able to render his relationship

to the nonhuman? What does the poem teach us about fugitivity and the need for black elsewheres governed by different laws, different grammars of encounter and exchange?

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From the first lines of Carl Phillips's "White Dog," the poem provides a working vocabulary for thinking the particularity of the historical relationship between black persons and the dogs they claim as kin and companions, a relationship always already marked by both a reckoning with the utter opacity of the animal other and a willingness to relinquish even a semblance of control or dominion as a direct result of that reckoning:

> First snow—I release her into it—
> I know, released, she won't come back.
> This is different from letting what,
>
> already, we count as lost go. It is nothing
> like that. Also, it is not like wanting to learn what
> losing a thing we love feels like. Oh yes:
>
> I love her.
> Released, she seems for a moment as if
> some part of me that, almost,
>
> I wouldn't mind
> understanding better, is that
> not love? She seems a part of me,
>
> and then she seems entirely like what she is:
> a white dog,
> less white suddenly, against the snow,

who won't come back. I know that; and, knowing it,
I release her. It's as if I release her
because I know.[3]

One is left to wonder what, beyond the briefest insight we are granted here, the poem's speaker *knows,* exactly. That is, what sort of knowledge allows for the loss of the beloved, nonhuman other to serve not as a moment in which one might mourn the loss of property or grieve a dearly departed friend but as an occasion to name the loss as something other than loss, a release that is antecedent, given. The speaker is aware, and says outright in the first stanza, that there is no possibility of reunion or return. Once set free, the white dog will remain free and in remaining free—which is also to say, at a distance beyond the reach of human hands, human gaze, or human control—will destabilize the sort of loyalty or fealty that one readily expects from it, a loyalty that is presumed *at the level of biology.* When the speaker claims that this scene is "nothing like" a moment in which one might let what we "count as lost go," he is, I would like to argue, employing a gesture that can be found throughout African American letters, that is, explicitly naming the difference between letting go of what one had and lost and letting go of what one knows *one did not and never could own*—which is not to say that there is no sense of belonging present in the relationship between the eponymous white dog and the speaker as described here. Instead, "White Dog" models for the reader a vision of belonging without ownership, kinship against the logic of private property.

The speaker does not release the white dog so as to learn something new about grief ("Also, it is not like wanting to learn what/losing a thing we love feels like") or because the depth of

his commitment to care for and live alongside her has waned ("Oh yes:/I love her") but rather because the will of the animal flashes before him and demands to be reckoned with as true will, as desire that must be treated ethically, rather than subsumed or repressed in the name of a presumed mastery. Normative relations are forgone altogether here in pursuit of an open relation that accounts for the dog's deep interiority and, what is more, what Jakob von Uexküll would call the animal's relationship to its *umwelt,* its personal life-world, over and against and apart from the speaker's vision of the landscape, his reading of the unstable distinction between the dog and the snow made unstable not only by color but by the unwieldy nature of possession itself.[4] Here, the dog functions as the enfleshment of the wild ostensibly made tame, a subdued, domesticated wildness disappearing into a wildness that can never be curtailed or confined. And for a moment, this wildness is also the wildness of the speaker, a part of himself he "wouldn't mind knowing better."

The speaker thinks to call this impulse love and immediately thinks better of it. The gesture toward the elevation of the human emotional life against, even *through,* the flesh of the white dog is instead made into an object of critique. Rather than understanding the dog as a technology through which the speaker might come to a higher plane of self-understanding or otherwise arrive at an epiphany about his interior world that depends on the dog in an abstract sense but could just as easily be projected onto another nearby, nonhuman actor, the speaker opts for a vision of love—which in the Phillips poem we might also read as a particularly black love that blurs the space between entanglement and relation, indeed that dances in the chaos produced by the caesura that might have separated the two terms in the first instance—that rejects so-

lipsistic introspection or dominion in favor of things unknowable, things unseen. Though the speaker may feel as if the white dog is *a part of him*—which is distinct from a mutual entanglement and registers instead as a rendering of the animal-as-extension—and indeed experience her companionship this way in the course of their shared, quotidian experience, there is nonetheless the fact of her *dogness,* a fact that returns throughout the poem to complicate and ultimately unmoor that feeling, throwing it into relief in the wake of the storm that doubles as the occasion of the dog's refusal of such a fiction, her preference for what lies beyond the bounds of the domestic sphere. The dog's "release," then, works in a double sense. Her freedom is bound up with the will of the speaker but is not reducible to it. The speaker releases the dog once it becomes clear that she is *already free of him,* that she has always had her own set of concerns, her own *bauplan,* or "building plan," in Uexküllian terms, her own understanding of the "meaning carriers and meaning-factors" in the lived environment.[5] The speaker merely recognizes this desire and chooses to honor it rather than repudiate its pull. It is the thinking that undergirds this choice, that is, the critical interpretative leap from *seems* to *is* that marks the transition from the poem's fourth stanza to its fifth, that is our central concern: "and then she seems entirely like what she is / a white dog, / less white suddenly, against the snow, / who won't come back. / I know that; and, knowing it, / I release her. It's as if I release her / *because* I know." At the close of the poem, we are given an image of dogly affect, of *dogness,* that serves as something of a discursive intervention. For Phillips, the white dog is legible as such not because of her presumed desire for a human master but rather the converse. It is the dog's very distance from the whims and inner workings of the human that mark her position. What

Phillips uncovers here is a decidedly asymmetrical desire, a human need for companionship marked by proximity, and often obedience, that does not originate with the dog but emerges here as a product of a particular kind of androcentrist cosmology. The white dog herein refuses to live as a reflection of a man's inner world and instead asserts her own, daring to relinquish her particularity (less white suddenly, against the snow) that she might enter the clearing, indulge in its endless possibility.

To be sure, the *letting go* we see modeled in Phillips's "White Dog"—a move that, it bears mentioning, is in the first instance an ethics, a necessary reckoning with the reality of material and otherwise worlds that exist beyond the province of human knowledge—is a mode of planetary thinking. It is a form of black sociality that asserts that "what love and connection the speaker holds for and with [the white dog] must be held with the knowledge that she is her own completely separate entity, free to remove herself from the speaker entirely, and not subject to human emotions."[6] The speaker's willingness to critique a vision of human love that seeks to oversimplify the sheer breadth and capacity of the dog's life-world—which is also to say, a love that effectively imagines nonhuman animals as nonentities without interior lives worth considering—is also an unsettling of the very terms by which many people have come to understand dogs as a distinct category of animal life:

> It does not do any good composing sonnets if you are a dodo. You are obviously missing the intelligence you need to survive (in the dodo's case, this was learning to avoid new predators such as hungry sailors). With this as our starting point, the dog is arguably the most successful animal on the planet, besides us. Dogs

> have spread to all corners of the world, including inside our homes, and in some cases onto our beds. While the majority of mammals on the planet have seen a steep decline in their populations as a result of human activity, there have never been more dogs on the planet than there are today. . . . I am fascinated with the kind of intelligence that has allowed dogs to be so successful. Whatever it is—this must be their genius.[7]

For Vanessa Woods and Brian Hare, the genius of dogs is inextricable from what we might read as an unsurpassed ability to adapt to the ways of the dominant species, to move with and alongside humankind in a way that makes their presence invaluable. What remains altogether unchallenged in this vision of evolutionary history, however, and disturbingly so, is the sleight of hand that allows for the wanton destruction of nonhuman life all over the planet to enter the frame as mere "human activity." What lingers behind such phrasing are too many dead bodies to count, entire ecosystems reduced to cinders in the name of human progress and the advancement of Western civilization. Further, to argue that dogs have only fared as well as they have over the centuries because of their usefulness to the human project as living actors rather than as primarily food or fuel, that they have flourished, at least at the level of population, because of what is posited here as some sort of organic inclination toward *servility,* is to also damn the wild, to pathologize the myriad forms of plant and animal life that have and continue to buck against human domination in ways that are and are not legible within the bounds of an anthropocentrist worldview. Further, what persists throughout this passage, though it remains largely unmarked, unacknowledged, or else repressed, is the capacity of the dog to *lie,* to live in the home or lie in the bed

of a human master simply as a means to its own unknowable ends. How might the worldview presented by Woods and Hare be complicated by a reading of the dog as a double agent or quiet insurgent, the dog not as an extension of a human master but an infinitely more complex being, one with a set of desires that are largely unknowable to the human mind? In this regard, the Phillips poem serves as a useful counterpoint to the sort of widely accepted thinking about not only the long-standing social role but also the ostensibly hard-set neurological predispositions of dogs. Phillips's is a vision of dog life without any masters worthy of the title, one in which the *bauplan* of his companion animal takes precedence over the world he once imagined for them both.

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From the opening scenes of *Salvage the Bones,* it is clear the novel is one that will require readers to recalibrate and revise our most basic categories, to seek out fresh, more nuanced vocabularies for the social and psychic world unfolding before us. The story begins with a white dog gone feral, legibly unsettled, at least, seemingly uncontrollable: "China's turned on herself. If I didn't know, I would think she was trying to eat her paws. I would think that she was crazy. Which she is, in a way. Won't let nobody touch her but Skeet. When she was a big headed pit bull puppy, she stole all the shoes in the house, all our black tennis shoes Mama bought because they hide dirt and hold up until they're beaten soft. . . . Now China is giving like she once took away, bestowing where she once stole. She is birthing puppies."[8] From this opening scene, then, we already have a sense of some of the major themes that will serve to structure the novel. Everywhere we find the language of conflict and collision: the dog, China, *turning on herself,* the image of the

black shoes beaten soft by use, the birth of a litter of puppies as a kind of compensatory gesture in the wake of a long-standing debt. The first glimpse we get into the psychic life of the text's narrator betrays an eye for metaphor and violence alike, a keen attention to the way categories fold onto and over one another and never without the potential for loss. Motherhood is the opening scene's central object of concern, and it is absolutely essential that there is more than one mother present when the narrative begins—in no small part because what Ward provides readers with here is an alternative language for motherhood. To become a mother, Ward seems to say, is also always, in some sense, *to go crazy,* to lose the sense of oneself as a single being and enter into a kind of embodied multiplicity that challenges the dominant vision of an enclosed, self-contained subjecthood. For China to become a mother, she must lose herself, implode, and somehow simultaneously make right the damage she does when she first enters the world. Motherhood, as it is described here, is inextricable from the proliferation of brute force, chaos deployed in all directions. And this destruction is not at all separate from the in-breaking of life into the world but constitutive of it. There is no new birth without destruction, no life without a certain version of the world coming to a close: "China is licking the puppies. I've never seen her so gentle. I don't know what I thought she would do once she had them: sit on them and smother them maybe. Bite them. Turn their skulls to bits of bone and blood. But she doesn't do any of that. Instead she stands over them, her on the side and Skeetah on the other like a pair of proud parents, and she licks."[9] What becomes clear not long after this passage is that China is a fighter, Skeetah her coach and trainer and kin, the pair of them a force to be reckoned with in the dogfights that reign as a popular pastime in the novel's primary setting of Bois

Sauvage, Mississippi. *Bois Sauvage* is, of course, French for "wild wood," and it is this motif of wildness, the constant presence of actors sentient and otherwise that cannot or will not be tamed or made civil, that takes center stage throughout the text. Thinking with the terms that the novel's narrator, Esch, makes readily available for us, we can immediately read a linkage between the "craziness" she attributes to China and a descent from domestication into a certain wildness, a line of flight taken away from the sort of discipline that has made China such a dominant force within Bois Sauvage's community of animal prizefighters. It is China's very identity as a fighter, however, that complicates her newfound role as a mother and caretaker for Esch. What she expects the moment the puppies come into the world is not anything legible as love or affection but instead the kind of violence for which China is best known, a kind of unrelenting cruelty that doubles as the condition of possibility for Esch and the rest of her family to continue to live.

At the moment readers arrive in the world of *Salvage the Bones,* it is China, the companion animal and new mother, that has served as the breadwinner in Esch's household for some time, a role she entered, we are led to believe, once Esch and Skeetah's father stops working in the wake of their own mother's unexpected death. Thus, when Esch describes Skeetah standing with China as if the two are "a pair of proud parents," there is also a gesture, I think, toward the sort of antinormative, distinctly *wild* kinship relations that have emerged in the wake of the loss of the potential for a nuclear family, the alternative possibilities that have opened up given the absence of the mother who preceded China, the woman whom we are never introduced to, in fact, by any name other than "Mama." It is not only the present violence of motherhood, then, that haunts the

novel but also the ghost of a mother lost, a mother who never got the chance to raise the youngest of the children in the house, Randall and Junior, and only saw the narrator, Esch, grow to be a young girl.

Mama's absence is felt everywhere. The wildness we see from Esch and others is intended, in part, to be a reflection of their ostensible lack of adult guidance, what happens when the ones left in charge of the house are a teenage boy and his dog. To Ward's credit, this aspect of the text never transforms into a kind of cautionary tale. Quite the contrary. Though Mama's absence is clearly the source of all sorts of interpersonal conflict and individual trauma that we see characters wrestling with throughout the novel, the difficulty of reckoning with her ghost also serves as the foundation for Esch's connection with China, her understanding of the dog not only as a family pet but as a comrade in a meaningful sense: "Color washes across the stick like a curtain of rain. Seconds later, there are two lines, one in each box. They are skinny twins. I look at the stick, remembering what it said on the packaging in the store. Two lines means that you are pregnant. You are pregnant. I am pregnant. I sit up and curl over my knees, rub my eyes against my kneecaps. The terrible truth of what I am flares like a dry fall fire in my stomach, eating all the fallen pine needles. There is something there."[10] Esch's description of her pregnancy as a "terrible truth" is especially pointed here given its proximity to her description of China's experience giving birth. The fear she feels is clearly not only that of the potential presence of a child, and thus also an entire vision of the future she did not imagine or plan for, but also what registers as a fear of becoming what she has borne witness to, an animal gone mad, a subject without a center or stable ground to rely on. And it is this fear of losing control, of being

given over to wildness, that pursues Esch constantly. It manifests itself primarily as a kind of recurring, inverted personification at the level of description, entire taxonomic categories stretching until they go slack, slipping into one another, forming new assemblages. When describing a lover, Esch claims that "his muscles jabbered like chickens."[11] At one point, she refers to her childhood home as a "drying animal skeleton, everything inside . . . was evidence of living salvaged over the years."[12] In the landscape that Esch paints for us, there is a porousness between worlds, a kinship and commonality among living and nonliving things alike. Following Colin Dayan's claim that "dogs stand in for a bridge—the bridge that joins persons to things, life to death, both in our nightmares and in our daily lives," I wonder if we can think about Esch and China's relationship as just this sort of forged connectivity across the boundary of species, a rapport beyond blood that also extends to the vast majority of person-nonperson relations that compose their shared social world.[13] What Dayan calls a bridge is also a blurring, a marring of distinctions rooted in white-supremacist anthropocentrism. For Esch already knows that there is an antecedent, forced proximity between her and China long before she discovers that she is pregnant, knows that they are both considered—at least, under the terms of civil society's flattening optics—what I would like to think of here as *low life*. China, after all, is not only a dog but also a pit bull and thus always already criminalized in advance by virtue of pervasive social stigma. And she is not only a pit bull but also a fighting dog, a double outlaw. Esch is a poor, dark-skinned black girl from a town in the Deep South that is named outright for its utter lack of civility, its murky depths and untamed flora. What emerges from this shared exclusion from the realm of the proper is, I think, the possibility of an altogether

distinct relationship to the category of ownership itself, a robust, working vocabulary through which we might imagine the abolition of species hierarchy. To think with and about *low life* in its many registers is to turn a critical eye toward the sites and nonsubjects that have historically been considered unworthy of study. It is to take seriously the myriad social protocols and practices that flourish at the level below which one cannot go, to immerse oneself in the infinite possibilities dreamt up and given flesh by the kids and beasts and broken things that have made a way out of no way, that have forged a kind of life underground, in the blackness at the bottom of the world.

To be clear, the putative *lowness* of low life is not rooted in a moralist viewpoint, though it is certainly a gesture toward the judicial, nor is it necessarily a description of the inherent quality of the lives of those who might be said to inhabit such a category. Instead, the phrase is intended to operate as an ongoing critique and complication of life in the upper divisions of mainstream social strata—what Lauren Berlant and others might call *the good life*—and what is more, as a spatial description of an elsewhere in which the forms of life that are repressed, subjugated, and every day subdued might have room to establish a robust sociality among themselves, a commons even outside the commons, below it.[14] This is the world into which Esch enters when she discovers that she is pregnant and becomes part of the larger community of mothers, human, nonhuman, and otherwise that serve as the central focus of *Salvage the Bones*. Dayan writes,

> How can I seize on dog life in words? Dogs live on the track between the mental and the physical and sometimes seem to tease out a near-mystical disintegration of the bounds between them.

> What would it mean to become more like a dog? How might we come up against life as a sensory but not sensible experience? We all experience our dogs' unprecedented and peculiar attentiveness. It comes across as an exuberance borne by a full heart. . . . What does it mean to think outside our selves and with other beings? For dogs, thought is immersed in matter. Not sympathy or sentiment but something more acute and unsettling. When dogs find themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time, belonging to the wrong kinds of people or protecting earnestly the homes of their human companions, they gather themselves up in their flesh, and in a state of prescience and acceptance, they prepare for the time when life stops, as they slip away toward stillness. It is not that they do not know what is going to happen to them but that they know too well.[15]

Dayan's description of what we might effectively think of as a kind of *becoming-alongside* is immensely useful as it pertains to sketching a fuller picture of the way Esch describes her own internal universe, one in which she is constantly finding herself connected to China by both ineluctable violence and tenacious love. It is this bond that compels Esch to move from the strictly sensible into the *sensory,* to gather herself up in her flesh and enter a much more complicated, often more dangerous, relationship with the broader social world. At several points, China's fearlessness becomes Esch's. Indeed, it becomes clear that the sort of unquenchable, inviolable fierceness that drives China as a fighter is altogether inextricable from the way we see Esch move throughout the social milieu of Bois Sauvage. One gets the sense that Esch *feels everything,* that there is no detail of the lived environment—or the inner lives of her fellow characters—that is not readily available

to her capacious vision, her razor wit. Esch is quiet, yes, but there is always a tempest lurking beyond the veil, a rage repressed but never quenched. This willingness to engage with a black girl's fury—this anger that is nothing if not the desire to live over and against a psychic and political order sharply oriented against the expression or cultivation of such desire—and to render it as a sign of resistance rather than a mark of pathology or dysfunction, is part of what distinguishes *Salvage the Bones* as a text of great importance for the way we might work toward a theory of black feeling. In this theory, we might return to the wild as a means through which to abolish the stranglehold of a white-supremacist imaginary—wherein, it bears noting, a vision of civility is championed that is always already contradictory in the first instance given the history and present effects of settler colonialism—turning antiblack pathology on its head via a refusal that is also a critical embrace, a recoding of terms that makes the space of the beast, the animal, the savage, or the barely salvaged a space that we might inhabit with joy. Here is where we see in action a working lexicon for sociality outside the bounds of the civil, how everyday people live and die at the underside of modernity.

Thus, the connection between China and Esch is made manifest not only in slippages between the human and nonhuman realm at the level of description, or in the ways in which both help us to reimagine the distinction between tenderness and aggression, but also in the individual relationships between China, Esch, and their respective sexual partners: Manny and Kilo. In a scene that serves as a critical point of insight into the gender politics of the novel—which is also to say, the various ways in which species hierarchy enters the world of the text *by another name*—we are granted access into both Manny's own, deeply sexist ways of thinking about

the relationship between sex and strength and a compelling counterpoint from Skeetah: "'Any dog that give birth like that is less strong after. Even if you don't think it. Price of being female.' Finally Manny glances at me. It slides over me like I'm glass. Skeetah laughs. It sounds as if it's hacking its way out of him. 'You serious? That's when they come into they strength. They got something to protect.' He glances at me, too, but I feel it even after he looks away. 'That's power.'"[16] In opposition to Manny's absurd, cruel schema, Skeetah argues here that motherhood is the site of a kind of strength that—unlike a legibly patriarchal form of power—is given charge not by the freedom to dominate land or women or labor but rather by *the call of the other,* the call to relation. It is the arrival of the child in the world that inaugurates this singular strength, this strength that is so often called, as Manny makes plain, weakness or loss. Skeetah's reversal, his marking of the figure of the mother as also the site of a strength that cannot be readily accessed otherwise, cannot be tapped outside of the mother-child bond, is a moment of refusal that doubles as an occasion in which Ward is showing us how to read the novel, how to trace the thread of the mother as both protector and agent of wide-scale destruction. For Ward, the *coming into strength* that Skeetah invokes often carries with it tremendous consequences, the proliferation of unexpected casualties, bodies left broken in the wake of a mother's rage.

Though this idea is most readily visible as it pertains to the personification of Hurricane Katrina toward the novel's conclusion, it becomes clear at various points that China too is more often than not operating from a position in which her reasons for deploying certain kinds of hostility, though they might be explicable to readers, certainly do not read according to any neat anthropomor-

phism that might endear us to China as a character. There is a pair of scenes, for instance, in which she attacks her own puppies. Though the first, Skeetah explains, is a moment in which China is trying to keep the rest of her litter safe from one of their siblings that has been infected with parvovirus, the second moment, in which she mauls the puppy that most clearly resembles his father, Kilo, remains more or less opaque. Skeetah states it plainly, even throwing in a bit of rhyme for emphasis: "We savages up here on the Pit. Even the gnats. Mosquitoes so big they look like bats."[17] This moment of self-naming, this critical embrace of *savagery,* is one of the novel's greatest gifts. In Bois Sauvage, and in the Pit in particular, where China fights and trains and eventually gives birth, there is a relationship to and with violence that has absolutely no truck with the language of civil society. Savagery is the way of the Pit, and that not only means that certain forms of violence are permissible but also that this thing called violence is blurred, transformed, and ultimately reflected in the world of Bois Sauvage in ways that structure the intimate relationships between the text's central characters. There is no place in the text untouched by the brutality that surrounds this community, the violence that shapes everyday life at the world's bladed edge.

Manny's cruelty to Esch in particular is a regular point of reference throughout the novel, and it is the combination of this unerring meanness and his direct, ongoing, and unfounded criticism of China that establishes a clear parallelism between him and Esch on one end of the analogy and China and Kilo on the other:

> Rico is Manny's cousin, the boy from Germaine who bought his dog, Kilo to mate with China. Rico's big red muscle of a dog with a killing jaw. It was Manny who talked up Kilo to Skeetah. . . .

> Manny would talk shit whenever we were all out under the trees as if he could lessen the wonder of Skeetah's prized dog. He thought he could dim her, that he could convince us she wasn't white and beautiful and gorgeous as a magnolia on the trash-strewn hardscrabble Pit, where everything else is starving, fighting, struggling. . . . When they mated, China had let Kilo lick her from behind, let him mount. Smiled like she liked it. . . . Kilo had placed his big mouth on her neck like he was kissing her and slobbered on her. She'd snapped at him, figured it for a hold. Hated the submission of it. She nicked him, snapped at him until she threw him off. She'd drawn blood, he hadn't.[18]

Ward's depiction of the moment in which Kilo and China encounter each other lays bare the inherent, myriad violences that produce the plot's point of origin, the terror that serves as the condition of possibility for China to become a mother. We are not spared a detail. We find out that Kilo's "killing jaw" was, in some sense, a selling point—that, of course, and China's notorious hunger for blood beyond even the demands of competition, a fury well known throughout the dogfighting circuit that she and Skeetah ran through in the moments leading up to this one. And yet it is something more than bloodlust that we are compelled to see in this scene, something more even than the muscle memory that Esch alludes to toward the close of the passage. China's refusal to heel or be held by anyone except for Skeetah is a reflection of their particular bond, one that exceeds mastery or metonymy. For China is indeed a part of Skeetah, as she is a part of Esch, though in ways that complicate any easy, straightforward vision of human dominion or doggish servility. Given Skeetah's earlier definition of what makes the denizens of the Pit especially "savage,"

we know that it is a designation that travels across species—even the gnats and mosquitoes are larger than life, mutated beyond clear taxonomic boundary. It is apparent that we are meant to read China as not so different from Skeetah or Big Henry or Randall or Junior or even Esch with regard to her everyday experiences of violence and intimacy as twin edges of the same blade.

The primary distinction that emerges to mark China is the shimmering whiteness of her fur, and even this is thrown into relief, in a sense, by the other descriptions of her that abound throughout the book. Put differently, as a result of her position as a white dog that is *blackened by her breed*—and here, I am indebted to the work of not only Dayan but popular writers such as Malcolm Gladwell who have written publicly about the ways in which pit bulls have become the objects of state repression as a result of their association with poor, largely nonwhite US American populations—but also her place within a larger kinship network made up almost entirely of poor black folks, we are compelled to rethink the metonymic labor of whiteness in the text, to consider the other ways in which China's whiteness might be working at the level of device.[19] Her name is a fitting a place to begin. Though there is the surface reading that draws a one-to-one connection between the whiteness of China's fur and the whiteness of a set of fine china dishes and stops there, there are also any number of other readings available given the various ways that China is characterized by Esch, as well as the specific scenarios in which her phenotypical whiteness is mentioned. Keeping with the coupling of China the dog and *fine china,* we can perhaps read her name in the first instance as a gesture toward delicacy or refinement, gentility over and against the harsh surroundings from which Skeetah and Esch have emerged. To come from Bois Sauvage, to live and work in the Pit and yet still

name one's dog China, is to assert a certain kind of beauty where there is said to be none, a savage beauty that is not as easily breakable as fine china, though it may bear its trace.

In this vein, we might also read the name *China* as a marker of smoothness, a testament to the way she moves in every fight, fur and skin so smooth that no other dog can touch her, much less get a hold going that will do any real damage. To be china is to be precious, well kept and cared for. And it is in this register that I think we find the most interesting component of China's name at the symbolic level, that is, the mutual adoration between her and Skeetah. Skeetah does not refer to himself nor is he referred to as her owner but regularly mentions her as his teammate and collaborator, the nonhuman companion he cherishes and trains alongside: "I wonder if he has trained her to do this, to stand at his side, to not dirty even her haunches with sitting so that they gleam. China is white as the sand that will become a pearl, Skeetah is black as an oyster, but they stand as one before these boys who do not know what it means to love a dog the way that Skeetah does."[20] The love that Esch invokes here is one that destabilizes kind and kin and color in one fell swoop: Skeetah's dark oyster and China's ashen pearl are rendered almost indistinguishable by the smooth blur of their relation. China's whiteness is representative, I think, of both what Jacques Derrida might call "the infinite distance of the other" and a Motenian vision of blackness in which blackness "claims" those who are not necessarily legible as members of the African diaspora—or even and especially, I would argue, the category of the human—but nonetheless are marked and marred by their condemnable proximity to black people, black locales.[21] China is an example of the ways in which blackness destabilizes the very practice of taxonomic distinction, a dog that is *optically* white but

undoubtedly blackened as a result of her daily participation in black social and public life, as well as her ongoing companionship with Skeetah. Her chromatic whiteness functions, then, we might imagine, not as a corollary to racial whiteness but along an altogether different symbolic vector. When Esch compares China to a magnolia blossom or sand, it is an attempt to insert her into a broader ecopoetics that asserts vitality where it is not readily visible, to praise the starkness of her bright white coat the way one might praise a star, only visible against the blackness that serves as its condition of perceptibility. Indeed, when one pivots from Esch's description of China's chromatic whiteness to Skeetah's—and this is no small matter in part because we are led to assume that it is Skeetah who named China in the first place—during the course of a fight, we arrive at a rather striking litany of descriptors, none of which reinscribe what we might think of as a color theory delimited by the restrictions of a white-supremacist imaginary: "*China White,* he breathes, *my China. Like bleach, China, hitting and turning them red and white, China. Like coca, China, so hard they breathe you up and they nose bleed, China. Make them runny, China, make them insides outsides, China, make them think they snorted the razor, China. Leave them shaking, China, make them love you, China, make them need you, China, make them know even though they want to they can't live without you, China, My China,* he mumbles, *make them know, make them know, make them know.*"[22] China's name and her color by extension seem to signify a distinctly *low* sensibility and set of affects: intoxication, addiction, indiscernibility. China is a force that obscures, rearranging every border and boundary, blurring inside and outside, pleasure and pain, life and death. And it is this indeterminacy, bodied forth in the form of a song crafted by her closest companion, that gives charge to

China's color as a useful metonym for thinking outside what we might normally ascribe to whiteness. Here, rather than imagining her coat in contrast to the wildness of Bois Sauvage, the irreducible, irredeemable blackness of its inhabitants and all that they touch, we can instead read China's whiteness as a site of intoxication and excess, her whiteness as always already blackened, as a "dark white" even, to use Samuel Beckett's phrasing.[23] Through China's flesh and the proximity to blackness she enacts in her everyday movement throughout the world of the Pit and beyond, whiteness and blackness as semiotic markers are muddled, thrown into flux. China must *make them know* who she is, make them know her strength, her ferocity and skill, because of the supposed distance between what her flesh signifies and the world she inhabits, the shine of her coat and the dirt and grime from which she emerges.

In truth, it is the dirt and the grime that creates the bond beyond blood that sutures Kilo and China and Esch and Manny, this spatial and otherwise proximity that tethers their futures together—and not only their futures, we come to find, but all those who choose the life that Skeetah and China have chosen, life *at the edge of the life,* to use Dayan's term, sociality beyond the borders of the civil:

> They will all match today, one dog against another. The boys have been drawn by gossip of the fight between Kilo and Boss to the clearing like the Argonauts were to Jason at the start of his adventure. They will throw their own dogs into the ring, each hoping for a good fight, a savage heart, a win, to return home from the woods, their own dangerous Aegean Sea, to be able to say, *My bitch did it* or *My nigga got him.* Some of the boys are ner-

> vous; they put their hands in their pockets, take them out, swing their sweat rags in the air and swat at gnats. Some of the boys are confident: shoulders round and grinning. . . . A hawk circles in the air above us, turns, vanishes.[24]

Here, in the clearing, the unrelenting forms of restriction that govern the lives of these boys are altogether cast aside, eschewed in favor of a worldview wherein the boundaries between forms of life come crashing down. Again, the *savage* appears not as a marker of derision or worthlessness but as a modality defined by courage and tenacity. The savage heart is that which flourishes in the midst of the unlivable, which persists over and against an entire structure set up against it from the very start. In what constitutes one of the book's essential turns, we come to see that the violence to which these boys expose their companion animals is the same violence they experience every day. Again, it is the commonplace nature of this brutality—not only its frequency *but that it is held in common*—that makes all the difference. This is a violence that extends even beyond the human-dog relationships in the novel as structured within the bounds of the fight and into language that serves as the condition of emergence for what we might think of, following Giorgio Agamben, as *relation without rank*.[25] In such a space, Esch's repetition of *my bitch did it* and *my nigga got him* is a clear instance not only of a certain kind of black vernacular repurposing—wherein phrases traditionally used as gendered and racialized epithets become terms of both endearment and empowerment—but also of a desire to think kinship across the human and animal realms rooted in familiarity and a sense of pride. Such reversals are commonplace throughout *Salvage the Bones* and reflect Ward's commitment to creating a narrative landscape in

which no categories remain stagnant or pure. Everything here is on the move; everything warps and loses its mooring.

The big fight that the boys have gathered to see is between Kilo and Boss, but it is the final fight of the novel, a match between Kilo and China, that ends up taking up more real estate than any other in the text, an exchange that ends in the only moment of internal dialogue we get from any of the animal characters:

> She is fire. China flings her head back into the air as if eating oxygen, gaining strength, and burns back down to Kilo and takes his neck in her teeth. She bears down, curling to him, a loving flame, and licks. She flips over and is on top of him, even though he still has her shoulder. He roils beneath her. She chews. Fire evaporates water. *Make them know make them know make them know they can't live without you,* Skeetah says. China hears. *Hello, father,* she says, tonguing Kilo. *I don't have milk for you.* China blazes. Kilo snaps at her breast again, but she shoulders him away. *But I do have this.* Her jaw is a mousetrap snapped shut around the mouse of Kilo's neck.[26]

Skeetah's chant appears to us anew here, given fresh life by China's tenacity. In this final fight, the knowledge that China offers to all those who are looking on is also a kind of counterknowledge, an infusing of the sign of the mother with a certain destructive force and brute strength. In the small piece of internal monologue we bear witness to, she addresses Kilo as *father* in a way that signals everything but kinship and actually serves to distance him as an object of empathy or affection. Kilo's relationship to China extends only as far as his contribution of genetic material—the traits for which he was selected as a breeding partner—and goes no further. She has no milk for him, no compassion or care—only fire,

only the strength of her neck and the cut of her white teeth. This image of the figure of the mother as a source of great terror, indeed, the mother as destroyer or unstoppable force, is not limited to China. By the novel's end, when Hurricane Katrina has ravaged the land and there is barely a home standing in Bois Sauvage, Esch will refer to the storm not only as "the mother that swept into the Gulf and slaughtered" but also, later on, as "the murderous mother who cut us to the bone but left us alive, left us naked and bewildered as wrinkled newborn babies, as blind puppies, as sun-starved newly hatched baby snakes" and, finally, as "the mother we will remember until the next mother with large, merciless hands, committed to blood, comes."[27] In *Salvage the Bones,* motherhood is a category that is open to both the nonhuman and the *nonliving.* Esch's aforementioned mother, who, again, is referred to only as "Mama" throughout the text, appears primarily as a phantom, never speaking, animate only in the brief flashbacks that Esch provides.

Nonetheless, it is this constellation of mothers—Katrina, Mama, China, and Esch—each inhabiting a different position in a normative hierarchy of biological life, that teaches us how to read *Salvage the Bones* for signs of joy and vitality, where some might see only blight, a great land laid to waste. For it is in the wake of Katrina's great destruction, when the debris has smashed its collective head into the homes of the dispossessed, countless shards of glass glinting like dewdrops against the dead wet earth, that we encounter a truly breathtaking moment of black sociality somehow breaking through: "Christophe and Joshua's porch was missing, and part of their roof. A tree had smashed into Mudda Ma'am and Tilda's house. And just as the houses clustered, there were people in the street, barefoot, half naked, walking around felled trees,

crumpled trampolines, talking with each other, shaking their heads, repeating one word over and over again: *alive alive alive alive*."[28] Even after the end of the world, then, we find that there is still an occasion for gathering. Over and against a philosophy of bare life or social and civic death that might name these men and women and children and animals already long gone, there is a refusal bodied forth in the very act of speaking one to another, of returning repeatedly to that which is supposedly farthest from their reach: a life worth recognizing as such. The Katrina survivors of Bois Sauvage go as far as to turn their refusal to die into a kind of spell, a song that speaks life where it simply cannot be, futurity where all available metrics signal finitude. Just as Esch calls us to see China as her sister in the novel's final pages, the black poor of Bois Sauvage demand that we think of life and death, abundance and utter lack, not as clearly demarcated antipodes but as altogether inextricable.[29] Death, to invert the Nietzschean formulation, *is a species of life*.[30] For the denizens of the Pit—not unlike those who inhabit the Muck, the Clearing, the Bottom, and countless other spaces in and through which the historically marginalized have forged imposed nothingness into a kind of living—there is a flourishing that exceeds the reach and restrictions of modernity.[31] There is a world beneath the world. And it shimmers.