

**SALVAGE THE BONES: A TRANSCORPOREAL BILDUNGSROMAN**

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**ABSTRACT AND INTRODUCTION**

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Stacy Alaimo defines “transcorporeality” as “the time-space where human corporeality, in all its material fleshiness, is inseparable from ‘nature’ or ‘environment’” (“Trans-Corporeal” 238). Although she uses the term in an essay concerned more with feminist studies, Alaimo does address the way transcorporeality lends itself to ecocritical analysis; she argues that the former allows “corporeal theories and environmental theories [to] meet and mingle in productive ways” (238). Transcorporeality goes beyond simply collapsing the binary between the human and the non-human; it specifically hinges upon the ideas that humans are some of the very stuff that constitutes the natural world, and that there is a crucial material interconnectedness between the two.

While transcorporeal theory can be used as a lens to explore essentially any text, some works are better suited for this kind of analysis over others. One example of a text that demonstrates the main tenets of transcorporeality is *Salvage the Bones* by Jesmyn Ward. The novel chronicles the experience of a poor, black family living in a fictionalized rural town, Bois Sauvage, Mississippi, as Hurricane Katrina approaches. While preparing for the storm, Esch, the fifteen-year-old protagonist, struggles to come to terms with her pregnancy; in the midst of several other issues affecting the family, the possibility of being pregnant is a concern that she feels should remain private. During this time, Esch begins to heavily connect herself with China, the family’s dog, who gives birth in the opening chapter of the novel. As the story progresses, Esch also adopts an awareness of her body as matter. These observations express a oneness with the physical world and ultimately contribute to a transcorporeal consciousness of self, enabling Esch to become mindful of her physical connections with China, the hurricane, and the natural world overall. Using transcorporeality as a framework to approach the text, I will argue that *Salvage the Bones* chronicles Esch’s transcorporeal evolution in a way that simultaneously challenges anthropocentrism because of its exploration of what Alaimo calls the “interconnections, interchanges, and transits between human bodies and nonhuman natures” (*Bodily Natures* 2).

Reflecting the stages of Esch’s transition, this essay is divided into three parts. It begins with an analysis of the ways particular scenes demonstrate Esch’s initial anthropocentrism. From here, I will highlight the point at which there is the emergence of a transcorporeal shift. The essay concludes with an acknowledgment of Esch’s complete transition into a transcorporeal consciousness of self. In these ways, Ward’s novel serves as a transcorporeal bildungsroman, a story of the protagonist’s coming of age towards a transcorporeal identity.

**INITIAL ANTHROPOMORPHIC VALUES**

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The novel’s opening scene highlights the ways modern culture generally distinguishes between the human and the non-human, the former of which we consider more important. The story begins with China in labor, a scene that we experience through Esch’s eyes. Esch recalls that when China “was a big-headed pit bull puppy, she stole all the shoes in the house... [and] hid them all under furniture, behind the toilet, stacked them in piles and slept on them.... She’d stand rigid as a pine when we tried to take them from her” (1). This depiction elicits a striking contrast between culture and a naïve use of the term

“nature.” In this context, culture specifically refers to the popular belief in anthropocentric values, while nature concerns “the non-human world, the non-artificial” (Clark 7). Based on Esch’s account, one can infer that the family considers China’s actions both annoying and inconvenient. Esch’s memory establishes this dualism – culture/nature – at the novel’s opening, which functions as a way of playing with our cultural assumption regarding human superiority. Timothy Clark’s statement about dualisms supports this claim: “the first term of each pair has often been defined in opposition to and with implicit superiority over the other” (111-112). This early in the novel, Esch merely regards China as “the dog” (1) in the same way that many people would. Esch even goes so far as to explicitly draw a distinction between the human and the non-human: “[w]hat China is doing is nothing like what Mama did when she had my youngest brother, Junior” (1). During this opening scene, Esch creates a divide between herself and China that is indicative of her assumptions about humans and non-human animals.

Esch draws this separation between herself and China because of these cultural assumptions, and makes a distinction that, in essence, is anthropocentric. Clark defines “anthropocentrism” as “the almost all-pervading assumption that it is only in relation to human beings that anything else has value” (2). In China’s case, not only does she provide the family with a companion, but we later find out that she is used for dog fighting. Esch clearly demonstrates a bias against China because she is non-human. This sort of discrimination is one that translates to Esch’s view of the physical world in the novel’s first chapter, when she discusses the origins of the Pit, or the family’s property; it initially belonged to Esch’s grandparents on her mother’s side, “around fifteen acres in all” (14). Esch says that they “owned the land,” then lists several things that her grandfather, Papa Joseph, “let the white men” do, such as “dig for clay that they used to lay the foundation for houses” and “take all the dirt they wanted” (14). It is not until Papa Joseph thinks that “the earth would give under the water [as a result of the digging], that the pond would spread and gobble up the property and make it a swamp” that he stops “selling earth for money” (14). Here, the family displays an anthropocentric view of the physical world as a result of the way they “thingify” it. Alaimo defines “thingification” as “the reduction of lively, emergent, intra-acting phenomena into passive, distinct resources for human use and control” (“Trans-Corporeal” 249). The family’s definition of “nature,” then, not only aligns with Clark’s – “the non-human world, the non-artificial” (7) – but it also takes into consideration what Alaimo argues “nature” should *not* be: “a passive resource for the exploits of Man” (244). Rather than viewing themselves as part of the material which constitutes the natural world, the humans in the novel view themselves as above their definition of “nature”. Moreover, the fault of Papa Joseph to allow such destruction, and to only cease it when it will directly have a negative impact on his own wellbeing, serves as a collective memory because of the way his mentality is passed down from generation to generation. In this way, the story Esch includes about Papa Joseph affects her perception of “nature,” and the cultural assumptions that dictate his actions are beliefs that Esch adopts.

The family’s beliefs about humans and the natural world are clearly materialized when Esch reveals the way her family members get rid of waste: “[w]e dump our garbage in a shallow ditch next to the pit, and we burn it” (15). This action is another one which demonstrates the family’s anthropocentrism and their ignorance of their connection with the environment. Nancy Tuana argues that “[t]he boundaries between our flesh and the flesh of the world we are of and in is porous” (198). She calls this “viscous porosity,” and claims that “[w]hile that porosity is what allows us to flourish... that porosity often does not discriminate against that which can kill us (198). Tuana also discusses “interactionism” in her essay, which “acknowledges both the agency of materiality and porosity of entities.... Interactionism is a metaphysic that removes any hard-and-fast divide between nature and culture” (191). Both ideas introduced by Tuana relate to the crux of Alaimo’s argument regarding transcorporeality, because they consider the human body to be permeable. Tuana’s and Alaimo’s ideas also attempt to dismantle the culture/nature binary by emphasizing the ways in which humans are physically some of the stuff that makes up the natural world. While this detail about Esch’s method of garbage control may seem insignificant with respect to the other issues combatted in the story – this is the

only point in which such fires are mentioned—it speaks volumes about the Batistes' lack of transcorporeal consciousness; if they were aware of the ways in which this activity not-so-urgently affected them, they would take to different means of waste control. According to the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, such fires are “big trouble.... Pollutants from backyard burning of trash are released primarily into the air, and close to ground level where they are easily inhaled.... Ash that remains contains concentrated amounts of these toxic materials that can blow away or seep into the soil and groundwater” (“Don’t Burn”). The effects of burning waste are gradual, and as a result Esch does not consider them critical, if she considers them at all.

### TOWARD A TRANSCORPOREAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Up until this point, I have argued that, in the beginning of the novel, Esch is anthropocentric in her obvious desire to separate herself from the non-human world. Whether her actions are conscious or not, Esch distinguishes between herself and China, as well as between herself and the physical world. Esch’s anthropocentrism hinders her from obtaining a transcorporeal consciousness of self. It is not until she begins to accept herself as a mother that Esch’s transcorporeal experiences begin to take shape. Esch accepting her maternity does not necessarily mean that she regards her situation as favorable; rather, that she at least recognizes it. The moments leading up to Esch taking the pregnancy test subtly demonstrate her coming into her transcorporeal identity. Although her actions are rather mundane, the way she provides every single detail of her experience suggests that each one is crucial.

The tub is dry. I pull out the test, run the water while I tear the plastic.... I lay it on the edge of the bathtub, and I climb in, careful not to kick it over on the floor. The tub is some kind of metal, and it is warm. The plastic mat on the bottom of the tub is soft.... My feet are black against the white, and they leave dirty streaks when I rub them against the tub. (36)

In the passage above, Esch begins to demonstrate a transcorporeal consciousness of self. As she describes the typical movement of one stepping into the tub to take a bath, Esch experiences an overt awareness of her own body in a way that defamiliarizes the action. These images rely on physical touch with the tub and mat. Here, contact serves as the most immediate and basic way for her to experience her own permeability: she focuses on the way things feel; and when her “feet... black against the white... leave dirty streaks when [she] rub[s] them against the tub,” she is able to directly witness the impact her body has on the rest of the material world. Esch begins to adopt a recognition of her body as matter, changing her understanding of “nature.” Before, she perceived it as “the non-human, the non-artificial” (Clark 7), “a passive resource for the exploits of Man” (Alaimo, “Trans-Corporeal” 244): a hybrid definition which would deem both herself and the tub unnatural. During these moments, Esch becomes aware of herself as matter as she slowly starts to understand it in Alaimo’s terms: as “the vast stuff of the world and of ourselves” (*Bodily Natures* 1). This new and developing meaning of “nature” is the first of several which ultimately functions to dismantle the cultural assumption regarding the culture/nature binary. While the above excerpt appears before Esch sees that “there are two lines, one in each box” (36), her seemingly over-analytic description insinuates that a change is taking place within her; and “[s]econds later,” she remembers that “[t]wo lines means that you are pregnant” (36). In these beginning stages, Esch’s kinesthetic awareness while in the tub dictates her forming transcorporeal consciousness.

Esch’s developing transcorporeal identity also unveils itself when Skeetah, Esch’s brother, tells her of his plan to kill one of China’s puppies that has contracted canine parvovirus, a highly-contagious viral infection that affects dogs. Skeetah decides to “separate him [from the other puppies]. Make it easy for him til he dies” (41). Skeetah also fears that if he does not get rid of the sick puppy, the others will contract the virus as well. Both the presence of dogs in the story and Skeetah’s choice to kill “the white and brown... cartoon swimmer” (39) are clearly anthropocentric; not only do they raise issues of ownership, but they also bring into question the treatment of non-human animals. Here, I purposely refrain from describing the puppies as pets. Our modern perception of domesticated animals is one that views them as a means for companionship or pleasure. Based on this cultural belief, none of Skeetah’s

puppies are pets, especially this sick one. When this “brindle” pup is first born, Esch reveals that Skeetah “is happy to have another puppy; if it lives, he can get maybe \$200 for it, even if it is a runt” (18). This observation reveals that, although Skeetah’s decision to kill the sick puppy can be viewed as a sacrifice in the sense that doing so would ensure the lives of the majority of the litter, it is actually an anthropocentric resolution; his only motive for saving the healthy puppies is money. In this way, Esch and Skeetah still have the ill intentions of “selling earth for money” (14) mentioned previously; in other words, they continue to view the non-human as property. In this context, “earth” is synonymous with the family’s original definition—Clark’s definition—of “nature.”

Skeetah’s decision to kill the parvo-infected puppy is important to the analysis of Esch. Esch shares the responsibility in this situation because, although she has already begun to come into her transcorporeal consciousness, she still supports her brother’s anthropocentric choice. When Skeetah asks her “[y]ou going to come out with me and camp tonight?” (40), Esch responds with “[y]eah.... You know I’m here” (41). It is easy to read her answer as “[y]ou know I’m here *for you*.” Such an addition adds a nuance to the sentence’s meaning which would denote allegiance to her brother as opposed to agreement with his anthropocentric values. The following sentences, which, in the novel, appear where I have placed ellipses, support this claim: “I breathe. My stomach flutters. I will watch Skeet kill his own” (41). Esch’s reaction demonstrates her developing transcorporeal sense of self. She experiences a strong awareness of her own body and its processes. The sentence “I breathe” places her corporeality alongside her physiology, invoking a distinct recognition of her body as both material and porous; Esch takes air into her own lungs, and then expels it. Her comment about her “stomach flutter[ing]” simultaneously conveys a recognition of her pregnancy and a discomfort resultant of a combination of Skeetah’s anthropocentrism and her need to remain loyal to him despite her transcorporeal development. Further, the syntactical abruptness of these two sentences bears a certain emphasis on them, providing the perfect foundation for her to “watch Skeet kill his own.” This final portion of the sentence is extremely significant, especially when placed in the context of a transcorporeal transition. The sentence is ambiguous; it is unclear whether “his own” refers to the sick puppy as Skeetah’s possession, or one of his kind. To interpret the sentence to mean the latter is to believe that Esch, at this point, has fully embraced her transcorporeality: to believe that she equates the human with the non-human, and rejects the culture/nature binary. It is an issue of semantics, but I argue that this is the moment that Esch truly adopts her transcorporeal consciousness of self and denies anthropocentrism, given the analysis of her vocal and physical responses to Skeetah’s question and her experience in the bathtub. Later moments in the novel serve to further solidify this position.

#### **EVIDENCE OF A COMPLETE TRANSCORPOREAL TRANSITION**

Once Esch abandons her anthropocentric values, her transcorporeal sense of self progressively becomes more explicit over the course of the novel. This new consciousness is apparent in both Esch’s commentary and her own actions. Esch ends the scene when she tells Skeetah “[y]ou know I’m here” (41). The first sentence of the scene that immediately follows is an observation; Esch realizes that “[e]ating is different now” (41). Again, Esch is aware of her body and its processes. Read in context, it is clear that this remark is connected to the acknowledgement of her maternity. The placement of this observation here serves to further reinforce the argument that Esch fully comes into her transcorporeal identity when she prepares to “watch Skeet kill his own” (41). The scene that shortly follows this statement also supports the ideas of Esch fully embracing transcorporeality and its progressive explicitness in the story: when Esch, Skeetah, Randall, and a few of their friends camp out in the woods near the Batiste house. Some of their adventure includes killing the sick puppy, hunting and eating a squirrel, and swimming naked in a pond of dirty water. Esch very explicitly experiences a bodily integration with the environment in this scene, during which her transcorporeal consciousness of self is rather apparent.

Although there are many significant moments embedded within the text of this scene, my discussion will focus on of the killing and eating of the squirrel. Esch observes as Skeetah “runs the knife in a jagged line down the squirrel’s chest [after shooting it], and then makes a cross across the animal’s

arms" (47-48). She comments that while dissecting the squirrel, "[h]e is "ruthless" (48). The specific use of the word "ruthless" to describe Skeetah at this moment strengthens the argument regarding Esch's total transcorporeal transition because it connotes a lack of concern for the squirrel's sufferings. From Skeetah's point of view, it is only in relation to himself that the squirrel has value. In this way, Skeetah is a proponent of the culture/nature binary; his anthropocentrism desensitizes him from having compassion for the squirrel. Unlike Skeetah, however, Esch knows that the squirrel is more than merely "a passive resource for the exploits of Man" (Alaimo, "Trans-Corporeal" 244). Despite Esch's transcorporeal identity, she neither refrains from eating the squirrel, nor is she required to; she only needs to acknowledge its life as valuable separate from her own human desires, which she does. After the boys finish "slapping small chunks [of squirrel meat] onto pieces of bread that are turning soggy with hot sauce" (48), for example, they superficially discuss the way their food tastes: Marquise says "[i]t's good," while Skeetah thinks "[i]t tastes burnt" (49). Esch's experience eating the sandwich, on the other hand, is entirely different as a result of her transcorporeal sense of self: "I bite [it] and I am eating acorns and leaping with fear to the small dark holes in the heart of old oak trees" (49). Read in the context of Alaimo's "maps of transit," it makes sense to say that Esch both literally and figuratively becomes the squirrel when she tastes the sandwich.

Perhaps the most palpable example of trans-corporeality is that of food, whereby the plants or animals become the substance of the human. While eating may seem a straightforward activity, peculiar material agencies may reveal themselves during the route from dirt to mouth.... [F]ood disappears into the human body, which remains solidly bound. ("Trans-Corporeal" 253-254)

When Esch eats the sandwich, the squirrel meat, as well as the bread and hot sauce, they become her means of nourishment. However, Esch has a greater understanding of what this truly means. Esch's experience eating the squirrel meat brings to life Alaimo's claim that "the human body is never static because its interactions with other bodies always alter it" (*Bodily Natures* 13). This moment, as well as the scene as a whole, clearly demonstrates Esch's sense of herself as a transcorporeal being.

Before I can begin my explanation of Esch's transcorporeal relationship with Hurricane Katrina, I must first analyze Esch's fascination with the story of Medea and Jason. This is because Esch's interest in Edith Hamilton's *Mythology*, which she reads for her summer assignment, functions as a framework to support the claim that Esch experiences a transcorporeal connection with the hurricane in the final moments of the novel. While reading Hamilton's mythological retellings, Esch constantly draws connections between events that happen in her own life and those that happen in the story. In Esch's mind, she is Medea and Manny, the father of her child, is Jason. One of the two most crucial moments in which Esch invokes this mythological story occurs when she confronts Manny and tells him that she is pregnant with his child. Manny, however, denies her accusation; he responds with "I ain't got nothing here.... Nothing" (203). According to Mamie E. Locke, Esch also calls upon "the mythological Furies, the avenging deities who punished criminals and were impossible to look upon because of their appearance" (12). Locke says that the Furies are responsible for the sense of "fury" as "a person, especially a woman, with a violent temper" (12). After remaining passive toward Manny for almost the entire duration of the novel, Esch becomes a fury and finally stands up for herself when Manny refuses her. Esch physically attacks Manny, claiming that the image of China fighting Kilo, the father of her litter, is her muse. She is violent and vengeful in the same ways Medea is. When she first strikes, Esch says she is "on him like China" (203). As she is "slapping him, over and over, [her] hands a flurry, a black blur," (204), she makes the following association: "[t]his is Medea wielding the knife. This is Medea cutting. I rake my fingernails across his face, leave pink scratches that turn red, fill with blood" (204). Locke also acknowledges this scene's importance to Esch's transformation; she argues that "[Esch] becomes Medea and [Manny] is Jason who betrayed her. She unleashes her anger and frustration, despite his name-calling. She is no longer one of the Furies, someone horrible to look at; she *becomes* the Furies, seeking retribution and to punish" (emphasis added 16-17). Not only is Esch now an active agent, but her resilience also amounts to that of several powerful, divine beings.

The fact that Esch sees herself as Medea at several points over the course of the novel serves as the basis of her transcorporeal relationship with Hurricane Katrina. After witnessing the damage done by the storm, Esch compares its destructive power to that of Medea. Because Esch first likens herself to Medea, it only follows that when she begins to equate the character to the storm, she ultimately demonstrates a transcorporeal oneness with it as well. Esch calls the hurricane “Katrina, the mother that swept into the Gulf and slaughtered[,]... the murderous mother who cut us to the bone and left us alive” (255). Esch clearly refers to the story of Medea here; as James Weigel, Jr. explains, “[w]hile the Corinthian women stand helplessly outside, they listen to the shrieks of the children as Medea kills them with a sword” (“Medea”). Esch modifies Medea’s story in order to convey that, unlike Medea, the storm spares her and her family. Esch ends with a description of “Katrina” as “the mother we will remember until the next mother with large, merciless hands, committed to blood, comes” (255). The image of blood not only connects this moment with the many instances of violence that occur in Euripides’s story of Medea, but it also ties back to the image of Esch scratching Manny, whose wounds “turn red, fill with blood” (204). After Esch spends the entire novel fixated on her admiration with Medea, it becomes clear that this association of Medea to the hurricane simultaneously works to connect Esch to the storm. This connection indicates Esch as transcorporeal because of the ways in which it serves to resist the culture/nature binary and anthropocentrism, more generally.

In order to demonstrate that Esch is anthropocentric at the novel’s opening, I began this paper with an analysis of her attempts to distance herself from China in the story’s first scene; she finds numerous ways to justify her anthropocentrism, claiming that she shares nothing in common with the dog. When Esch recognizes her maternity, however, her feelings about China and the larger natural world begin to change. By the novel’s close, Esch appears to believe she and China share a strong bond, one with their maternity as its base. While Skeetah expresses his certainty of China’s return after she is dragged away by the storm’s powerful currents, Esch hardly listens; she pays more attention to his movements, and his body’s transformative possibilities.

Skeetah rubs his head from his neck to the crown like his skin is a T-shirt he could pull off and over his skull. Like he could pull who he is off and become something else. Like he could shed his human shape, in the dark, be hatched a great gleaming pit, black to China’s white.... (257)

The repetition of the word “like” in the passage above works to emphasize the unlikeliness of the changes Esch mentions. Here, “like” functions as a conjunction, and can be replaced with “as though” or “as if.” Esch asserts that an immediate transcorporeal change, as suggested by the aforementioned image, is impossible; rather, it must be a process of progressive development dictated by certain experiences. The topic of maternity also occupies this thought; the image of hatching obviously has connotations of birth and motherhood overall. In these ways, Esch’s awareness of Skeetah’s body, as well as the observations she raises, supports the argument that she now acknowledges herself as a transcorporeal being; and the image of changing, of becoming something else, directly relates to her transcorporeal evolution that takes place over the course of the novel. The issue that remains, however, is that of the ambiguous ending. Esch is determined to wait with her brothers for China’s return, of which she is hopeful. Esch says that China “will know that I have kept watch, that I have fought. China will bark and call me sister.... She will know that I am a mother” (258). At this moment, Esch’s motherhood is not restricted to the body forming inside her. While I have argued that Esch accepts her maternity during the scene in the bathtub, I agree with Mary Ruth Marotte, who claims that “[o]nly when she battles through the storm does Esch truly become a mother.... [T]hough she is far from giving birth, she has given birth to a new vision of herself, as a warrior like China” (216). Although Marotte’s idea of Esch’s new identity specifically relates to Esch’s place in the larger African-American pregnancy narrative, it also translates to a study of her new transcorporeal consciousness. In this way, China serves as a means by which the anthropocentric-to-transcorporeal evolution of the novel materializes.

## CONCLUSION

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In a sense, Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* functions as a transcorporeal bildungsroman; rather than following the formation of Esch's social identity, the novel chronicles her experience navigating her environmental identity, one that ultimately manifests in a transcorporeal sense of self. Although Hurricane Katrina is unanimously considered a tragedy, a permanent wound on our nation's historical past, it nonetheless serves as the most vital contributor to Esch's transcorporeal identity. This new sense of self leads Esch toward a more accurate understanding of her place in the larger natural world by enabling her to become aware of the ways in which she is materially connected to it. In this way, it is plausible to argue that Esch ultimately benefits from the struggles of her transcorporeal development. The hurricane, then, which serves as the climax of her transcorporeal evolution, actually functions to convey what Ward herself calls the "'legacy of not evacuating' ... one of fierce determination in the face of devastating loss" ("Pregnancies, Storms, and Legacies" 217). Ward's own experience with natural disaster, specifically the aftermath of Hurricane Camille, contributes to the creation of "characters [who] do not simply survive but move on seamlessly to shift into their new roles, roles they did not seem capable of inhabiting before the storm" (217). In the case of Esch, this means transitioning toward a transcorporeal self-concept. A closer reading of the novel, however, also reveals the ways in which it functions in opposition to anthropocentrism: it uses anthropocentric values to relate its characters to its readers, and then gradually chronicles one who overcomes the assumptions of her society. Approaching the text from Alaimo's point of view, it becomes clear that *Salvage the Bones* primarily explores issues of transcorporeality and anthropocentrism, and, by the story's conclusion, Esch is truly able to see herself as inextricable from the material world in which she lives.

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