


12-2017

# Pink is the New Bull: The Feminization of Pit Bulls in Visual and Literary Discourses as a Rescue Tactic

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## Recommended Citation

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**PINK IS THE NEW BULL: THE FEMINIZATION OF PIT BULLS IN VISUAL AND  
LITERARY DISCOURSES AS A RESCUE TACTIC**

A Thesis

Presented To

The Academic Faculty

By

Stephanie Hogue

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in American Studies

Kennesaw State University

December 2017

*In Loving Memory of Diesel*

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## Introduction: Pink is the New Bull

As a household pet, pit bulls are one of the most contentious and polarized dog breeds in the United States. They are banned from most apartment complexes and military housing, rental companies often won't insure them, and they are consistently portrayed in the media as perpetrators of severe and/or fatal dog bites. Even though the pit bull has historical connections to the blood sport of dog fighting, the breed has not always been at the center of a hostile climate. In the 1930s, pit bulls were promoted as good family pets and were featured in wartime posters and popular television shows including *The Little Rascals* and *Our Gang*.<sup>1</sup> American icons such as Ernest Hemingway, Teddy Roosevelt, and Helen Keller all owned dogs who would be categorized as pit bulls. Pit bulls were symbols of strength during World War I and symbols of masculinity for fraternities and sports teams, and they were generally accepted as family animals. Their positive reputations continued until the early 1980s when the national media sensationalized dog fighting and proclaimed that pit bulls were vicious, unpredictable, and violent. Rather than incite audiences to act as agents of change to minimize incidents of dog fighting and animal abuse, the glamorized stories increased dog fighting as individuals, enticed by the supposed riches and status acquired by dogmen, began obtaining, breeding, training, and fighting pit bulls. Historically, dog fighting had been confined to the rural south and was predominantly run by white, poor men, but the media frenzy of the 1980s sparked a rise in dog fighting by minority males in low-income urban communities. The national media concretized the connection between these minority males and pit bulls, and the pit bull was subsequently appropriated by hip-hop artists and became permanently associated with Black/African American and Latino males in low-income urban communities across the United States.

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<sup>1</sup> Hillary Twining, Arnold Arluke, and Gary Patronek, "Managing the Stigma of Outlaw Breeds: A Case Study of Pit Bull Owner," abstract, *Society & Animals* 8, no. 3 (2000).

The negative portrayals of pit bulls and their raced, classed, and gendered identities had devastating and deadly consequences for the breed. Breed Specific Legislation (BSL), defined as laws that ban certain breeds and/or place restrictions on the owners of those breeds, was passed in municipalities and counties across the United States against pit bulls and/or pit bull-type dogs. Housing complexes added the breed to the list of prohibited “Dangerous Breeds,” and homeowners and/or renters insurance became inaccessible or exorbitantly priced for pit bull owners. Potential pet adopters either believed the misconstrued characterizations of pit bulls as inherently violent or, if not, they were faced with daunting restrictions for adopting one.

Believing the task of changing the national narrative to be too difficult and unable to work around the strict legislations, many animal rescuers stopped assisting pit bulls until 2005 and 2007, when Hurricane Katrina and the Michael Vick dog fighting case, created sympathy for pit bulls in urban and violent spaces, respectively. Capitalizing upon the piqued interest of American audiences, animal rescuers began assisting pit bulls once more, except they were tasked with not only saving pit bulls and addressing their needs, they also had to resist and redefine the hegemonic raced, classed, and gendered identities of pit bulls to make them more appealing to dominant audiences.

This thesis seeks to explore the raced, classed, and gendered representations of pit bulls in cultural productions and the nuanced ways in which the intersectional identities ascribed to pit bulls have impacted their status as acceptable pets in the United States. I specifically focus on the gendered representations of pit bulls and how female animal rescue workers are using their genders to change the masculine identity associated with pit bulls to a more feminine identity. Part One, “‘Hood’ Dog: The Sociohistorical Context of Pit Bulls in the United States,” provides a brief history of the representations of pit bulls in popular culture productions in the United

States and explores the raced, classed, and gendered constructions of pit bull owners and animal rescuers. In Part Two, “From the Hood to a Home: Making Pits ‘Adopt-a Bull,’” I aim to demonstrate that through visual and literary discourses, female animal activists, advocates, and rescuers are intentionally situating pit bulls within feminine spaces to disrupt their associations with masculinity and male violence to make them more appealing and henceforth adoptable by predominantly white, middle-class suburban pet owners. I conclude this project by explaining why the disruptions in raced, classed, and gendered representations of pit bulls are critical rescue efforts, and I advocate for animal rescuers to work symbiotically with pit bull advocates to create both proactive and reactive solutions to create a sustainable culture that increases the number of pit bull adoptions and decreases the disproportionately high number of pit bulls killed annually due to a negative representation and misjudged breed.

## **Part One: “Hood” Dog: The Sociohistorical Context of Pit Bulls in the United States**

In 2012, I adopted a 4-month-old puppy from the Atlanta Humane Society. All black with white paws, he had a large head, broad chest, and giant brown eyes. On his adoption papers, he was labeled as a “pit bull/Labrador retriever mix.” Unbeknownst to me at the time, the “Labrador retriever” breed would become nonexistent in many spaces, usurped by the “pit bull” label and hidden behind my dog’s dominant phenotypical characteristics of pit bull-type dogs such as his broad chest. As a white, middle-class, educated female in her mid-twenties born and raised in the United States, there are a limited number of moments in my life where I have personally experienced oppression or discrimination due to aspects of my identity. I acknowledge and am aware of the level of privileges my identity affords me. As a pet owner, however, my privileges are diminished, erased by the raced, classed, and gendered associations of my pit bull. Over the last five years as a pit bull owner, I have had strangers jokingly refer to criminal associations because of my dog’s breed. I have had others ask if I allow him to sleep in my bed or if I was afraid he would “eat my face in the middle of the night.” One acquaintance asked why I had adopted a “hood dog.” I have navigated spaces in which I was hesitant to disclose my dog’s breed, afraid for the repercussions and judgments. I have experienced housing discrimination and difficulty obtaining rental insurance. I have made conscious decisions to buy collars and leashes that would make him appear friendlier in an attempt to mitigate the often-experienced discrimination.

My personal experiences as a pit bull owner are the impetuses that caused me to research the pit bull breed and its associations. Prior to adopting my dog, I was ignorant of the intersectional identities that had been ascribed to pit bulls and the consequences of those associations. I began to ask myself where did pit bulls come from? What history did they have?



Why was a pit bull referred to as a “hood dog”? Why was my dog’s breed raced, classed, and gendered, and what did it mean that I, as a white, middle-class educated female, adopted a pit bull and spoke out vocally against these stereotypes?

In this section, I will provide a brief history of pet ownership in the United States and explain how race, class, and gender are intricately associated with pets and their owners. I offer historical information on the pit bull breed and trace the history of media representations of the pit bull from the early 1900s to the 1980s—the decade in which the pit bull’s association with male minorities in low-income urban communities became concretized due to national media attention. I conclude this section with a discussion on the history of women in animal rescue and demonstrate how pit bulls, as dogs associated with low-income male minorities in urban communities, create an intersectional paradox for the white female animal rescuers who seek to save them.

### **What’s in a Name? Clarification on the Use of the Term “Pit Bull”**

Prior to engaging in the scholarship on pit bulls, it is imperative to note that while each scholar analyzes pets and pit bulls from various perspectives and academic disciplines, they are all in agreement that the term “pit bull” is inaccurate as it not a recognized breed. In Katherine Grier’s *Pets in America: A History*, Grier defines breed as the following: “Breeds of animals occur within a particular species where mating within a closed population leads to the development of a particular set of appearances and behaviors.”<sup>2</sup> The term pit bull does not actually refer to one breed but rather a generic category that includes the American Staffordshire Terrier, the Staffordshire Bull Terrier, the American Pit Bull Terrier, and the American Bully. Dogs from these four breeds labeled as a pit bull “can weigh anywhere from twenty-five to one-

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<sup>2</sup> Katherine Grier, *Pets in America: A History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2009), 28.

hundred pounds...and come in at least sixteen different coat colors and patterns.”<sup>3</sup> In 2017, dogs labeled as “pit bulls” were also historically labeled as “bulldogs, pit dogs, pit bulldogs, white bulldogs, brindle bulldogs, American bulldogs, Boston bulldogs, Boston bull terriers, bull terriers, pit bull terriers, and Yankee terriers, among other names.”<sup>4</sup> Pit bulls are “dogs with a ‘category problem,’”<sup>5</sup> as any dog with pit bull characteristics including broad shoulders, muscular bodies, and short-hair is often identified as a pit bull without proper genetic testing. The term pit bull, while not biologically accurate, carries heavy associations and consequences for dogs labeled as such which is demonstrated in Gunter, Barber, and Wynne’s 2016 article, “What’s in a Name? Effect of Breed Perceptions & Labeling on Attractiveness, Adoptions, & Length of Stay for Pit-Bull-Type Dogs.”

Gunter, Barber, and Wynne conducted a series of different studies to determine whether or not breed labeling, specifically for “pit bulls” or pit bull type dogs, influences potential adopters’ perceptions of the breed subsequently impacting the amount of time pit bulls spent in shelters and their rates of euthanasia. In the first study, 228 participants were asked to view photographs of a Labrador Retriever, a border collie, and a “pit-bull-type” dog and then complete a questionnaire about their perceptions of the dog’s level of friendliness, approachability, intelligence, and level of aggressiveness, among other traits. Participants were then asked to view photographs of the dogs again, but this time, the dogs were pictured with a human handler. The “pit-bull-type” dog was pictured with either a “tattooed adult male, elderly woman, or male child.”<sup>6</sup> After viewing the images, the participants were asked to once again complete a

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<sup>3</sup> Bronwen Dickey, *Pit Bull: The Battle over an American Icon* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016), 9.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>5</sup> Harlan Weaver, "'Becoming in Kind': Race, Class, Gender, and Nation in Cultures of Dog Rescue and Dogfighting," *American Quarterly* 65, no. 3 (2013): 691.

<sup>6</sup> Lisa M. Gunter, Rebecca T. Barber, and Clive D.L. Wynne, "What's in a Name? Effect of Breed Perceptions & Labeling on Attractiveness, Adoptions, & Length of Stay for Pit-Bull-Type Dogs," *PLoS ONE* 11, no. 3 (2016): 3.

questionnaire about their perceptions of the dog's level of friendliness, approachability, intelligence, and level of aggressiveness, among other traits. According to the results, the "photographs of the pit bull next to the elderly woman and the male child greatly *decreased* the subjects' perception of the pit bull's aggressiveness, while the photograph of the dog with the [adult tattooed male] increased it. In other words, context is key."<sup>7</sup>

In a different study, the researchers analyzed breed labeling. They asked 39 potential dog adopters at a shelter in Arizona to look at images of dogs labeled as pit bulls and images of dogs that were "morphologically similar" to the pit bull dog and rate their perception of the dog's level of friendliness, approachability, intelligence, and level of aggressiveness, among other traits. The researchers compared these results to the average length of stay for pit bulls and pit bull "lookalikes" in the shelter. The survey determined that even though the participants found the pit bull and "lookalikes" to be similarly attractive, "the average length of stay for pit-bull-type dogs was 42.07 days...and for lookalikes 12.80."<sup>8</sup> The research suggested that the breed "label" impacted potential adopters' decisions as the dogs were found to be equally attractive to the potential adopters.

The researchers corroborated their findings on the breed label by conducting an experiment at an animal shelter in Orange County, Florida. For one day, February 6, 2014, the researchers had the shelter remove all dog breed labels from the dogs' records given to potential adopters. The researchers compared the adoption rates for the February 6, 2014 adoption date to two years of data of adoption rates at the shelter. The survey determined that "when breed was included on the kennel card, only 52% of entering pit bulls were adopted compared with 64% once the breed information was removed. This was mirrored by a 12% reduction in euthanasia of

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<sup>7</sup> Dickey, *Pit Bull*, 25.

<sup>8</sup> Gunter, Barber, and Wynne, "What's in a Name?," 7.

pit-bull-type dogs.”<sup>9</sup> While the researchers demonstrated that dogs labeled as pit bulls experienced discrimination on the basis of their breed, their argument to remove labels from shelters does not change the national narratives associated with pit bulls. The stigma remains intact.

As Gunter, Barber, and Wynne’s research shows, even though the pit bull is not a recognized breed, the use of the pit bull label has significant and oftentimes deadly consequences for the four breeds categorized as pit bulls and those morphologically similar to pit bull dogs. For the purposes of this thesis, I will use the term pit bull with the acknowledgment that the term refers to a set of characteristics rather than a real breed as the term pit bull is what is commonly used by the American public.

### **History of Pet Ownership and the Pit Bull Breed**

Humans and animals have a long, complex history that has evolved simultaneously with human development. Animals have been relegated to various roles based on the current needs of society as sources of food, equipment, and companions, among others. In the United States, the history of animals, in particular canines, as pets is not only a story about the relationship between humans and animals, but it also a history of identities and identity politics since race, class, and gender as intersectional identities are used as constructs in pet ownership.

In Grier’s *Pets in America: A History*, Grier argues that the history of pet ownership in the United States is critical to understanding the histories of childhood development, environmental policy, consumerism, and human-animal interaction, and most importantly, that pet ownership “speaks to evolving ideas about the proper roles of men and women and to the historical

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.,12.

characteristics of the modern American middle classes.”<sup>10</sup> Grier states that contemporary notion of “pet keeping” or taking care of an animal as a pet arrived in North America with European settlers who brought dogs across the Atlantic as tools of “war and conquest.”<sup>11</sup> Grier notes that during the 1800s, the white, middle class established the standards of pet ownership, such as the best methods for taking care of pets through an ethos of kindness and compassion that was founded in “gentility, liberal evangelical Protestant religion, and domesticity.”<sup>12</sup> With more discretionary income available, those in the middle class were able to keep animals for leisure or as companions, a practice unavailable to those with lower socioeconomic statuses who mostly kept animals as sources of food or income. As pets, animals became a part of the “enlarged ‘household circle’ of dependent beings”<sup>13</sup> that would require care by the household matriarch as women were confined to their domestic spheres. In summary, pet ownership was established as a white, middle-class practice that developed gendered differences between men and women.

While pet ownership historically developed maternal identities for women, men (who were associated with the public life) would use hunting and fishing (the killing of animals) to form their masculine identities as killing small animals was “a rehearsal for the activities of manhood.”<sup>14</sup> Although hunting and fishing were deemed “appropriate” methods for men to inflict violence upon animals to develop and/or solidify their masculine identity, violence enacted upon animals was common in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in both rural and urban communities. Grier states that in the late 1700s and early 1800s, “blood sports” were part of everyday life and included activities such as setting a pack of wild dogs upon a tethered bear, cock fights, and dogfights.

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<sup>10</sup> Grier, *Pets in America: A History*, 8.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

While Grier analyzes blood sports from a gendered perspective, arguing that men used them to develop their masculinity, Massey discusses the classist aspects of blood sports, demonstrating that blood sports, as brought to the United States through Great Britain, were introduced through the British aristocracy. The Romans first introduced blood sports, such as bull and bear baiting, to the British with the Roman invasion in 43 A.D. Beginning in the Feudal era, the British elite popularized blood sports as a form of entertainment for the nobility. During the 13<sup>th</sup> century, however, the “appeal [of blood sports] soon spread to the common folk,”<sup>15</sup> and blood sports permeated national culture on all socioeconomic levels until the 18<sup>th</sup> century. By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the nobility had lost interest in bull baiting and no longer endorsed the sport. It was during this same time that dog fighting gained support as a blood sport among working class males such as those who worked in factories and mining industries. Requiring less space to stage fights and resources to train dogs, dog fighting was a more feasible sport to be recreated by the lower classes.

Dog fighting was introduced into the United States through immigration as male immigrants, predominantly from rural areas in Great Britain and Ireland, carried the tradition of dog fighting with them to the U.S.<sup>16</sup> Around the 1800s, bulldogs, which had been bred for bull baiting, began being cross-bred with a now-extinct breed of terrier to “produce a more agile dog for badger hunting, dog fighting, and rat killing.”<sup>17</sup> These dogs were referred to as bull terriers. The American Pit Bull Terrier, one of these types of dogs, originated as a fighting dog in Massachusetts in 1889.<sup>18</sup> Just as dog fighting was popularized as a sport among the working classes in Great Britain, throughout the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in the United States, dog

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<sup>15</sup> Wil Massey, "Bloodsport and the Michael Vick Dogfighting Case: A Critical Cultural Analysis" (master's thesis, East Tennessee State University, 2012), 13.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-23.

<sup>17</sup> Dickey, *Pit Bull*, 33.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

fighting was most prevalent among white, working class males of a lower socioeconomic status, especially in the Southeastern U.S.<sup>19</sup>

As Grier and Massey both demonstrate, dog fighting was a classed and gendered sport, and the intersectional identities of the dog handlers were projected onto the dogs themselves through associations. In addition to class and gender, however, the dog handlers' racial categories were also critical to the development of the raced, classed, and gendered identities of pit bulls. The racialized identities of pit bulls and their handlers in dog fighting is explored in Harlan Weaver's 2013 article "'Becoming in Kind': Race, Class, Gender, and Nation in Cultures of Dog Rescue and Dogfighting." In his article, Weaver discusses the intersectionality of race, class, sexuality, nation, species, and breed as it relates to pit bulls, pit bull rescues, and dogfighters. Weaver states that "the contemporary production of the pit bull in the United States as a kind of being frequently relies on, overlaps with, and connects to human racial categories."<sup>20</sup> Weaver notes that based on breed histories, American Pit Bull Terriers and American Staffordshire Terriers (two of the pit bull breeds) "were primarily owned and bred by white men in the rural southern United States for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in the 1980s there was an influx of urban men of color into breeding circles."<sup>21</sup> Analyzing articles, media reports, and pit bull rescue rhetoric, Weaver argues that although pit bulls were historically owned by white dog handlers, they have become most associated with urban men of color which is demonstrated in the media's "implicit and explicit connections among pit bulls race and criminalization." While Weaver deconstructs some of the media reports in 2007 surrounding pit bulls, he does not explain the origins of the associations between urban men of color or how pit bulls, which were historically owned by white Southern males, became so

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<sup>19</sup> Weaver, "'Becoming in Kind,'" 699.

<sup>20</sup> Weaver 694

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

heavily associated with urban men of color. In *Pit Bull: The Battle over a Cultural Icon*, Bronwen Dickey provides the history of pit bull representations' in the media and argues that the media was one of the largest factors that caused pit bulls to be raced and criminalized. As canines, pit bulls were enmeshed in systemic systems such as pet ownership and blood sports that were constructed upon raced, classed, and gendered identities that were then projected onto the animals themselves. These raced, classed, and gendered notions of pit bulls as dogs for urban, minority males were reinforced and augmented by the media.

### **Media Representation of Pit Bulls from the 1920s to the early 2000s**

Although pit bulls have been historically prominent in dog fighting, their associations with dog fighting and the intersectional identities associated with that activity did not permeate national discourse until the 1980s. Even then, their historical associations with white dog fighters was lost in the media and replaced with the then influx of dog fighting as a cultural sport among males of color in urban areas. In *Pit Bull: The Battle over a Cultural Icon*, Dickey traces the history of the pit bull as a breed and as a cultural symbol in the United States, chronologically analyzes the representations of pit bulls in the media from the 1920s to 2015, and argues that the current associations of pit bulls as the preferred dogs for male minorities in urban areas did not occur until the eighties.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, pit bulls were popular canine pets in the United States. Laura Ingalls Wilder, Helen Keller, Ernest Hemingway, and Theodore Roosevelt were owners of dogs that would be classified contemporarily as pit bulls. Dickey argues that in addition to the historical association with dog fighting that creates the gendered representation of pit bulls as masculine, the pit bull became a figure for masculinity in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as a counter to women's increased support for equal rights. Associated with fighting, the pit bull



became a prominent mascot for university athletic teams and fraternities as it represented a “can-do”<sup>22</sup> attitude. In 1915, the pit bull was used in a national recruitment poster for soldiers in World War I. Although still bred and used in dog fighting, the pit bull was beloved by the nation until the 1980s.

According to Dickey, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Americans began purchasing dogs as “guard dogs” rather than pets due to increased media coverage on race riots, civil unrest, and high profile murders. These “guard dogs” included Dobermans, German Shepherds, and Rottweilers. In addition to being overbred, the dogs were trained to be aggressive and were not properly taken care of, which led to an increase in dog bites and a subsequent national growing fear of dogs in the mid 1970s. This fear was exacerbated by the national media which sensationalized aggressive canine behavior. On August 15, 1974, the *New York Times* ran an article highlighting dog fighting, a blood sport that only reinforced fears of dog bites and dog aggression. In the article, Duncan Wright, executive director of the American Dog Owners Association, told the *Times* that dog fighting was spreading and that it had “quadrupled”<sup>23</sup> in the last few years. Duncan did not cite statistics for his statements, and at the time, he was one of the leading animal activists in the United States. Dickey noted that based on her historical research, there were only roughly fifty dogfighters in the United States in 1957, and during the early 1970s, dog fighting matches only drew roughly fifty spectators.<sup>24</sup> After King’s article was published, the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) launched a media campaign to raise awareness of dog fighting to garner support to enact federal anti-dogfighting legislation, however, the American media focused on the role of the pit bull in dog fighting rather than the dogfighters. From 1975-1982, major features on dog fighting appeared all over the US in the

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<sup>22</sup> Dickey, *Pit Bull*, 67

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 117

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 120

*New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, the *Miami Herald*, *Harper's*, *Esquire*, *GEO*, *Hustler*, and *High Times*. The media created and propelled pit bull myths to sensationalize their stories, claiming that pit bulls were taught to fight by using "bait" animals such as kittens and that pit bull jaws apply more force than any other canine with no scientific evidence. In addition to developing violent stereotypes about pit bulls, Dickey argues that the articles also glamorized the criminal aspects of dog fighting by highlighting the supposed large sums of money, drugs, and guns that were exchanged in fights. Antithetical to the HSUS's intentions to regulate and reduce dog fighting, the heightened media attention on pit bulls caused an increase in dogfighting as the attention cast the pit bulls as active and willing participants in dog fighting and their handlers as men who could assert themselves in the world as prize-winning dog handlers rather than animal abusers.

Prior to the late 1970s, dog fighting was predominantly comprised of Southern white males who held fights in rural areas, however, after the media's hyperbolic reports on dogfighting in the 1970s, dog fighting proliferated in urban areas. Dickey notes:

Thanks in part to all the media coverage it received during years of pronounced social ferment, the crime of dogfighting didn't go away; it got worse. Throughout the late 1970s and the 1980s it cropped up in places where it had not existed for a hundred years, mostly poor inner-city neighborhoods. For the unemployed and the disenfranchised, the prospect of making easy money without facing consequences was all too seductive.<sup>25</sup>

In addition to the glamorized lifestyle that the media attention garner dog fighting, the blood sport was easy to recreate in urban areas because pit bulls had become prominent pets in the urban communities with high crime rates. Dickey argues that in addition to being bred and purchased by dog fighting copycats, pit bulls were then purchased by families who thought, based off of the media attention, that pit bulls could guard them better than German Shepherds or

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 127

Rottweilers. Pit bulls were overbred in high crime urban areas, untrained, and encouraged by their families to be aggressive as guard dogs or as fighting dogs.

By the 1980s, pit bulls were a popular breed in urban areas, and by 1987, stories of dog bite deaths caused by pit bulls enthralled American news audiences. The pit bull was considered violent, and even though the pit bull had been historically linked to white Southern men, the pit bull's new place as the preferred pet for minorities in low-income urban communities concretely connected pit bulls with minority males of color during the 1980s racialized media attention on urban crime and crack cocaine. During the eighties, African Americans were criminalized and pathologized by the government, and by association, pit bulls were too. Dickey states, "The legend of the urban pit bull would become a literal companion piece to America's failed war on drugs. When a dog scare collides with a drug scare—especially one as racialized as the crack "epidemic"—the effects are multiplication."<sup>26</sup> After 1987, pit bull bans were enacted across the United States. Hip-hop artists used pit bulls in their music videos, album covers, and song lyrics. Pit bulls became a symbol and a tool in national media rather than a pet. Pit bulls represented strength and "rebellion, self-sufficiency, and a willingness to defend oneself at any cost--the qualities most necessary to survive on the streets."<sup>27</sup> They became a mascot for Black/African American and Latino males in low-income urban communities across the United States.

While Dickey establishes the foundation that connected pit bulls and Black/African American and Latino males in low-income urban communities, Theresa Allen's 2007 dissertation "Petey and Chato: The Pitbull's Transition from Mainstream to Marginalized Masculinity" deconstructs the effects of these connections. Through an analysis of images, policy analysis, and interviews with young male pit bull owners, Allen analyzes the image of the

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.,162

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 192

pit bull as an “urban predator”<sup>28</sup> and argues that pit bulls have become “a vehicle for the projection of deeper anxieties concerning the inner-city and the young men who reside there.”<sup>29</sup> Allen argues that this raced, classed, and gendered image associated with the pit bull has caused a rise in biased breed specific legislation as the policies are developed based on the violent and intersectional stereotypes perpetuated by the media. Like Dickey, Allen states that even though pit bulls have been historically associated with white men and dog fighting, it was not until the 1980s when the pit bull became associated with minority males in urban areas that pit bulls began being discussed in a violent context. Allen notes that the pit bull became a symbol upon which white middle class Americans could project their fears of the minority underclass. Allen ascribes the blame for the development of the pit bull as a predator predominantly on the news media which capitalized upon a United States’ “culture of fear.”<sup>30</sup> Allen notes that in 2006, there were 74 million dogs as pets in America but only twelve fatal dog bites per year. Statistically, only “two-ten thousandths of one percent” of dogs as pets fatally killed a human, yet through media coverage, fatal dog bite attacks by pit bulls seem like frequent occurrences. In 2014, the U.S. National Safety Council showed that in the United States, a person’s chances of dying by a dog bite are 1 in 116,448. According to the same statistics, a person is twice as likely to die by a hornet, bee or wasp sting than a dog at a chance of 1 in 55,764.<sup>31</sup>

Through sensationalized media coverage of pit bull attacks that began in the 1980s in conjunction with pit bull coverage also discussing gangs, violence, and drugs, the pit bull became a symbol of predation which, almost similar to a self-fulfilling prophecy, was then

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<sup>28</sup> Theresa Allen, "Petey and Chato: The Pitbull's Transition from Mainstream to Marginalized Masculinity" (PhD diss., University of Southern California, 2007), v.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>31</sup> Steffen Baldwin, "The Lies, Damn Lies and Statistics Behind Dog Bites," *Huffington Post*, September 10, 2015, The Blog, [Page #], accessed March 6, 2017.

adopted as a symbol by “oppositional inner city, gang culture...thereby imbuing it with a salient, visual indication of a threat to mainstream culture.”<sup>32</sup> Once pit bulls became racialized, gendered, and criminalized, national humane societies and rescue organizations receded from assisting pit bulls until the early 2000s.

Contemporary pit bull research cites two specific events that engendered new conversations about pit bulls—Hurricane Katrina and Michael Vick. In 2005, Hurricane Katrina decimated New Orleans, Louisiana. During Hurricane Katrina, household pets, including cats and dogs, were not considered in the evacuation plans sent out by the emergency disaster agencies rather evacuees were told to abandon them. Soon after the hurricane, national and local rescues, including the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and the National Humane Society, came to New Orleans to assist in locating, identifying, and saving the animals that were left behind. As a historically African American, low-income city, the breed most impacted by Hurricane Katrina was pit bulls, for “pit bulls were abandoned in the hundreds - either chained to the empty lots or displaced by homes destroyed by floodwaters.”<sup>33</sup> Rescue organizations attempted to save the animals left behind, including pit bulls, and the images and stories that came from New Orleans created sympathy for pit bulls in urban spaces for the first time.

Two short years later in April 2007, Michael Vick, a famous African American NFL football player, was arrested on charges of dog fighting. Forty-nine dogs were seized from Bad Newz Kennel (the property where he housed the dogs in rural Virginia). Of those 49, two of the dogs were euthanized (for health reasons), 22 were given sanctuary by Best Friends Animal Society, 10 went to BAD RAP [Bay Area Dog-lovers Responsible About Pit Bulls], and 15 were

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>33</sup> Wills Robinson, "The Forgotten Dogs of Katrina," *Daily Mail* (London), August 28, 2015, News.

given to shelters across the country.”<sup>34</sup> Prior to the rescue and rehabilitation of the former fighting pit bulls, aptly named “Vicktory dogs,”<sup>35</sup> there had never been such a large-scale organized effort by rescue organizations to rehabilitate and adopt out former fighting dogs. It was common protocol to euthanize all dogs seized from dog fighting operations. While the rescue of the pit bulls pulled from Bad Newz Kennels was a victory for pit bull advocates, the media attention that Vick received continued the racialization and criminality of pit bulls and the people associated with them. Dickey notes that the Vicktory dogs were “used as a pretext for a much more contentious war over human values and culture”<sup>36</sup> as Vick became a target for white America to project their racialized fears of minority men. Once the allegations of Vick’s dog fighting ring were released to the public including the violent details of how he killed underperforming dogs, individuals and the media described Vick’s behavior in coded racial language and displayed protest images with violent images of lynching and slavery, explicitly connecting the historical oppression and murder of African Americans, to condemn Vick’s actions. In Atlanta, a Vick effigy was burned in protest, a strategy that harkened back to historical racist murders of Black males. Vick was often characterized and/or described as a canine such as in cartoons that pictured him shackled to a wall.<sup>37</sup> The divisive racialization was exacerbated as the media juxtaposed the binary images of Vick with the predominantly white, middle class animal rescuers who advocated to rehabilitate Vick’s former fighting dogs and embodied the image of white saviors. Once in the care of the white rescue groups, the former fighting dogs were “cleansed of the taint of dogfighting”<sup>38</sup> and were described as being happy, friendly, and loveable. The dogs were shown in videos and on the news with white rescue

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<sup>34</sup> Dickey, *Pit Bulls*, 246.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 249.

<sup>37</sup> Weaver, “Becoming in Kind,” 695.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 697

workers. As Weaver states, “No longer partnered with ‘thugs,’ ...[the dogs were] recoded as ‘unique individuals’ with stories to tell and love to give, these dogs participate in families in ways that connect them to a tacit, normative whiteness.”<sup>39</sup> While the conversation about pit bulls had begun to change, the identity politics of pit bulls had not as the race, class, and gender of those humans most closely associated with the dogs were consistently brought to the forefront of the national conversation.

As the literature demonstrates, the national media, including newspapers, news stations, and magazines, created the negative portrayals of pit bulls and perpetuated their intersectional identities as the preferred canines for minority males in low-income urban communities. With the advent of social media, however, the national news platforms are no longer the only vehicles for disseminating information and images. Currently, pit bull scholarship does not address the images of pit bulls as they are portrayed on the prominent social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. According to the 2016 Pew Research Center, 68% of all U.S. adults use Facebook, 28% of all U.S. adults use Instagram, and a “majority of Americans now say they get news via social media.”<sup>40</sup> While the news conglomerates in the 1980s developed the criminalized image of the pit bull through their sensationalized coverage, current pit bull owners and activists are using social media networks as their personal communication outlets to challenge and alter the raced, classed, and gendered images of pit bulls and show them in their everyday lives as pets of female owners in predominantly white, middle-class suburban neighborhoods.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 698

<sup>40</sup> Shannon Greenwood, Andrew Perrin, and Maeve Duggan, "Social Media Update 2016: Facebook usage and engagement is on the rise, while adoption of other platforms holds steady," Pew Research Center, last modified November 11, 2016.

## Women in Animal Rescue

As the media campaigns surrounding the animal rescuers who saved the pit bulls from Michael Vick's dog fighting operation show, the race, class, and gender of animal rescuers plays a critical role in animal welfare, and the animal rescue movement was formed out of privileged intersectional communities. In 1824, William Wilberforce, an abolitionist, founded the world's first Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) in London.<sup>41</sup> Over 40 years later, in 1866, Henry Bergh created America's first Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA). Bergh's organization was the first animal welfare agency in the United States.<sup>42</sup> While men founded the first organizations dedicated to animal welfare, the contemporary animal rights movement is predominantly supported, staffed, and sustained by women, more specifically, women with race and/or class privilege. Since the 1800s, women have worked both within and outside of organizations (in ad hoc groups) to advocate for animals. Just three years after the founding of the ASPCA, in 1869, the women's branch of the Philadelphia ASPCA passed a motion to create a "'refuge for lost and homeless dogs,"<sup>43</sup> and in 1870, they built a homeless shelter for dogs. During this period, groups of women would work together to find stray animals on the streets and chloroform them as a method of humane euthanization.<sup>44</sup> Like pet ownership, which was predominantly comprised of upper to middle class Americans, Grier notes the classist element of animal rescue, stating that in the late 1860s, those members active in anticruelty groups were upper and middle class white men and women.<sup>45</sup> While the standards, missions, and types of rescue organizations have changed since the 1860s, women's roles in them have not.

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<sup>41</sup> Dickey, *Pit Bull*, 30.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 40.

<sup>43</sup> Grier, *Pets in America: A History*, 217.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 152.



In Emily Gaarder's 2008 article "Risk & Reward: The Impact of Animal Rights Activism on Women," Gaarder reports, based on the results of a qualitative study of 27 women animal activists, that in spite of the resistance the female animal activists experienced, the emotional toll of what they witnessed, and consequences they endured for their work in animal rights, the women in the study agreed that their "lives had become more enriched and meaningful since becoming animal activists."<sup>46</sup> Gaarder acknowledged the "complex emotional negotiations" that the women endured managing their activism with their personal and professional lives. Some women in the study had lost their professional career, some had been arrested, and others had lost personal relationships with friends, family members, and/or romantic partners and still remained dedicated to their activism. Gaarder argues that the women sustained their commitment to their activism because of the rewards they experienced, most prominently, the "satisfaction obtained from making a contribution to the world and living a more meaningful life."<sup>47</sup>

Like Grier, Gaarder acknowledges the identity politics in animal activism, noting that the United States animal activism movement is predominantly comprised of white, educated women. Gaarder briefly interrogates the intersectionality of class, race, and gender in the movement through her interview with a woman named Marianna. Marianna claimed that her Mexican friends accused her of "being whitened" because of her work in animal rights. In the interview, she stated:

I often feel—people have even told me—like my husband's friends....In Spanish, they say—because of my [animal rights] stickers and everything—they think that I'm whitened, I guess you could say. When my husband says he doesn't eat meat, they're like your wife got you into the white thing.

E.G.: Why do they think it's a white thing?

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<sup>46</sup> Emily Gaarder, "Risk & Reward: The Impact of Animal Rights Activism on Women," *Society & Animals* 16, no. 1 (2008): 19.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

Marianna: . . . As Chicanos, we're not American like white people, but we're not Mexican like people living in Mexico. It's like you have to fill this gap. We live here and it's this new deal. But they hold onto traditional things, like the patriarchy, and the meat-eating, and the cock fighting, and the dog fighting. . . . When I bring up animal stuff, they're like—it's a white world thing. We're not white; we're sticking with our deal.<sup>48</sup>

Since Gaarder's study was focused on the risks and rewards experienced by animal rights activists, she noted that Marianna's beliefs were "incompatible with her cultural background,"<sup>49</sup> but Gaarder does not assess the greater implications of the animal rights movement being labeled as a "whitened" and gendered movement. Marianna notes in her statement that her friends reject her participation in the animal rights movement because it is oppositional to their sustainment of Mexican patriarchal traditions as expressed here through the blood sports of cockfighting and dog fighting. As a female in a movement that opposes patriarchal traditions, Marianna's femininity becomes a critical component of the raced, classed, and gendered intersections of the animal rights movement.

While Gaarder and Grier focus on animal rights activism as a whole, Andrei S. Markovits and Robin Queen specifically assess the role of women in dog rescue organizations in their 2009 article, "Women and the World of Dog Rescue: A Case Study of the State of Michigan." Markovits and Queen conducted surveys and interviews of male and female dog rescuers in Michigan. Similar to the animal rights movement, "women are the predominant participants in dog rescue."<sup>50</sup> To provide examples, they noted that of the 95 registered golden retriever rescue organizations in the United States in 2005, only five had a male president while only nine listed male-female co-presidents. They also noted that of the 115 breed rescues in New England in 2005, only four listed a male as the primary contact. In Markovits and Queen's own survey, of

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 328.

the 255 survey responses, 235 (92%) were female and 20 (8%) were male.<sup>51</sup> It is also important to note that of the 255 survey respondents in Markovits and Queen's study, 155 (63%) had either a bachelor's or postbachelor/professional degree indicating that a majority of those surveyed were educated women. Markovits and Queen did not capture race or ethnicity of their participants. Regarding gender, Markovits and Queen's participants believed that traditional views of "masculinity" was the largest factor contributing to the women's overwhelmingly large majority in dog rescue. Markovits and Queen noted that 89% of their interviewees "used some version of traditional masculinity to explain the low presence of men in rescue" such as that dogs were "cute" and men "tend not to associate themselves" with animals that can be qualified as "cute" or that "when men associate themselves with dogs, it will be for hunting, police training, guard dogs, or other 'manly' purposes but not rescue."<sup>52</sup> Markovits and Queen also found that women were aware of their majority presence in dog rescue.

Overall, Markovits and Queen corroborate Gaarder's argument that women animal activists sustain themselves on the benefits they receive from participating in the movement. Markovits and Queen found that women rescuers saw themselves as spending time and preferring to spend more time with their dogs than male rescuers. They also saw themselves as being more connected to "matters of animal well-being" than male rescuers.<sup>53</sup> Markovits and Queen state:

Our study demonstrates for the first time the overwhelming place of women in the canine rescue world in Michigan. Women dominate all its facets, from its leaders to its foot soldiers. They do so—on the whole—with verve, enthusiasm, commitment, and with the perception that the benefits of this activity far outweigh its costs.... They are citizens who happen to love dogs, on whose behalf they assume many tasks and obligations, which they do not, as a rule, experience as burdensome.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 328-330.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 337.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 336.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 340.

Markovits and Queens' study offers an interesting perspective when placed in context with an observation noted, but not expounded upon, in Dickey's work. In *Pit Bull*, Dickey writes, "One of the many surprising contradictions about the world of pit bulls, which is thought to be so full of machismo, is that a significant number of its most outspoken characters are women."<sup>55</sup> When describing pit bulls, Dickey discusses the work of Konrad Lorenz, one of the founders of ethology (the study of animal behavior). According to Dickey, Lorenz called humans' innate preference for animals with large eyes and a "cuddly" appearance the Kindchenschema and believed that it triggered nurturing, positive feelings in human caretakers.<sup>56</sup> With small eyes, pit bulls are not typically categorized as "cuddly," and yet, men are still not predominantly involved in pit bull rescue (even though this was one of the reasons given by the respondents in Markovits and Queens' survey as to why they believed men were not as involved). Additionally, Markovits and Queens state that dog rescue, which emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, was frequently in "direct competition and conflict with humane societies and animal shelters"<sup>57</sup> which saw the breed rescuers as "elitist."

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<sup>55</sup> Dickey, *Pit Bull*, 76.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>57</sup> Markovits and Queen, "Women and the World," 328.

## **Part Two: From the Hood to a Home: Making Pits “Adopt-a-Bull”**

As demonstrated in Part One, pit bulls have been associated with criminality, African American men, and those in lower socioeconomic classes, yet the individuals who rescue animals are predominantly white, middle-class women with “elitist” privileges. As both a target of salvation for white women dog rescuers and a symbol of masculinity for minority males, the pit bull is placed in a paradoxical narrative, precariously on the precipice of a cultural conflict that centers on race, class, and gender representations.

In this section, I aim to demonstrate that through visual and literary discourses, female animal activists, advocates, and rescuers are intentionally situating pit bulls within feminine spaces to disrupt their associations with masculinity and male violence to make them more appealing and henceforth adoptable by predominantly white, middle-class suburban pet owners. In the first section, I will examine two photographic campaigns, Pinups for Pitbulls and Flower Power: Pit Bulls of the Revolution, to demonstrate how female artists are using feminine iconography to present pit bulls as softer, effeminate beings—representations that are antithetical to the mass media’s masculine representations of the breed. I will analyze a series of Instagram accounts controlled by female pit bull owners to show how the owners are using a series of photographic themes that are centered in femininity and an ethos of kindness to resist the masculine, criminal, and violent stereotypes associated with pit bulls and create a grassroots visual discourse that alters the dominant pit bull narrative. Finally, I end this thesis by examining Jesmyn Ward’s 2011 novel *Salvage the Bones*. I conclude that female artists and activists are intentionally feminizing pit bulls through alternative media sources such as photographic campaigns, social media, and socially-relevant fiction as a form of animal rescue to disrupt the dominant media’s discourse of presenting pit bulls as the preferred pets for minority males in

low-income urban communities in order to show the pit bull as an adoptable family dog for both marginalized and hegemonic communities.

## **Methodology**

This methodology section discusses the three methodologies I utilize for each section of this thesis.

## **Photographic Campaigns**

I selected the photographic campaigns Pinups for Pitbulls and Flower Power: Pit Bulls of the Revolution because they are both founded and run by female artists who stated that their purposes in creating the campaigns were to change public perception of pit bulls. Pinups for Pitbulls is a non-profit organization that was founded in 2005 with the intention of creating and selling calendars featuring pinup girls and pit bulls to educate individuals and raise awareness of the plights of the pit bull breed. Flower Power: Pit Bulls of the Revolution is a project founded by French photographer Sophie Gamand in 2014. Gamand photographs pit bulls that are currently available for adoption in animal shelters. In her photographs, the pit bulls are adorned with flower crowns and set in front of soft, muted backgrounds. Both campaigns also rely on feminine iconography—the female pin up model and flower crowns—which is clear in their campaigns' titles and visual images. The Pinups for Pitbulls images were selected from a Google Image search for the term “Pinups for Pitbulls.” I used purposive sampling to select three images that included both women and pit bulls in costume. I also utilized purposive sampling in my analysis of Flower Power: Pit Bulls of the Revolution. The images from Gamand's project were purposely selected from Gamand's Facebook page due to visual images and the captions associated with the images. While the visual imagery was the main focus of my analysis, I analyzed Gamand's captions to show how she utilizes femininity for animal activism.

## Instagram Accounts

I used purposive sampling to analyze a series of images from six popular pit bull-focused Instagram accounts that are managed by female pit bull owners. For the purposes of this thesis, “popular” Instagram accounts were defined as accounts with either significant numbers of followers or accounts that had received media attention. Four of the accounts were selected based on the high number of Instagram followers their accounts had (As of May 1, 2017, the account had to have at least 75,000 followers or more). Two of the accounts with less than 75,000 followers were selected based on media attention they received from online media outlets although it is noted that all of the Instagram accounts analyzed have been featured in at least one national online news outlet. These two accounts had significantly less followers, yet they had received public media attention which heightened their visibility. Please see Table 1 for a breakdown of the accounts.

**Table 1: Instagram Accounts**

Name as it appears on Instagram	Username	Number of followers	Media Attention Received
Brody Hippo	Brodyhippo	75,000	Barkpost <sup>58</sup>
Larry the Pitbull	Lvrntafghtr	47,900	Buzzfeed <sup>59</sup>
Malibu’s Adventures	Malibusmama	24,600	The Dodo <sup>60</sup>
Nanners	Journeyofnana	150,000	Huffington Post <sup>61</sup>
Sookie and Ivy	Sookieandivy	209,000	Barkpost <sup>62</sup>
The Whitest	thewhitestpupsyouknow	126,000	Barkpost <sup>63</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Kimber Gee, "These Instagram Rock Stars Are Promoting Pit Bulls In The Best Way Possible," *BarkPost*, last modified 2016, accessed May 6, 2017, <http://stories.barkpost.com/pitbull-instagram-stars/>.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Jill Anders, "People Were Scared Of This Pit Bull — Until She Started Wearing Bandanas," *The Dodo*, last modified February 3, 2017, accessed May 6, 2017, <https://www.thedodo.com/pit-bull-wears-bandanas-2236236582.html>.

<sup>61</sup> Arin Greenwood, "Formerly Abused Pit Bull With No Ears Gets Much-Deserved Second Chance," *Huffington Post*, last modified September 28, 2015, accessed May 6, 2017, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/nana-the-earless-pit-bulls-fantastic-new-life-gives-hope-to-everyone\\_us\\_56093f3fe4b0dd8503081380](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/nana-the-earless-pit-bulls-fantastic-new-life-gives-hope-to-everyone_us_56093f3fe4b0dd8503081380).

<sup>62</sup> Gee, "These Instagram," *BarkPost*.

Pups You Know			
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After selecting the accounts, I completed a thematic analysis using open coding. In my initial assessment, I looked through the last two years of Instagram posts for each account (if available as some accounts were created less than two years ago). After my initial review, I identified four themes present in all six Instagram accounts: anthromorphism (through costumes and holidays), pit bulls with other animals, pit bulls with their female owners, and awareness-raising of rescue organizations or advocacy groups and/or issues facing pit bulls. After identifying the themes, I screenshotted images from each account that exemplified the themes and included them as examples in my analysis.

### **Literary Analysis**

I analyze the 2011 young adult fiction novel *Salvage the Bones* by Jesmyn Ward through a Black Feminist framework. Ward's novel is set in rural Mississippi in the days prior to Hurricane Katrina. I selected Ward's novel because it addresses systemic issues affecting marginalized Black communities in the rural south through a fictionalized account of a family and their pet pit bull named China. Like the visual discourse presented by white female artists and pit bull owners, Ward feminizes China, yet she does so in a paradoxical manner as China acts as a maternal figure, but she is also a fighting dog. Ward presents a different standard of femininity through China and her (China's) effect on Black masculinity.

### **Results**

#### **Pawsitive Promotion: Photography Campaigns for Pit Bulls**

The phrase "A picture is worth a thousand words" is a cliché, overused idiom, but when it comes to pit bull photography campaigns, a picture can be worth a thousand dollars gained in

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.



fundraising for a rescue or a couple hundred rescued dogs. As visual discourses, Pinups for Pitbulls and Flower Power: Pit Bulls of the Revolution are challenging the masculine identities associated with pit bulls by photographing them within feminine contexts that include hyper-feminized models, animal costumes, and feminine symbols. In 2005, Deirdre ‘Little Darling’ Franklin, a former model and fine arts major, was “tired of finding that so-called rescues and shelters were euthanizing healthy, friendly, and adoptable animals due to their alleged ‘breed,’”<sup>64</sup> so she utilized her experiences and expertise to found the non-profit organization Pinups for Pitbulls (PFPB). PFPB’s mission is:

“to educate people about the history, temperament, and plight of the pit bull-type dog; raising awareness to rally against Breed Specific Legislation (BSL) and Breed Discriminatory Laws (BDL). PFPB’s goal is to restore the image of the pit bull-type dog to its former reputation of America’s companion animal, war hero, and family member.”<sup>65</sup>

As is apparent through their organization’s name, Pinups for Pitbulls accomplishes their mission through a visual campaign that places pit bulls in thematic photography shoots with female (and less frequently with both male and female) models. As stated in their mission statement, PFPB seeks to “restore” the pit bull’s image to that of a family dog, and they specifically do so by feminizing the image of the pit bull in their photo shoots.

Figures 1, 2, and 3 are images from PFPB’s calendar shoots. In these images, the backgrounds are bare or minimalistic if there is a background at all. There are also few props thus focusing the image on the models and the pit bulls. The models are all dressed in form-fitting clothing that accentuates their female curves, their hair and full make-up appear professionally done, and they are all wearing high heels. Although they have various facial expressions (a warm smile, a mischievous look, and a serious, tight-lipped stare), they are all

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<sup>64</sup> "Who We Are," Pinups for Pitbulls, accessed May 6, 2017, <https://pinupsforpitbulls.org/who-we-are/>.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

representations of a U.S. paradigmatic femininity—beautiful, coiffed, and sexualized white women. Not only are the pit bulls in the images placed in conjunction with highly feminized models thus creating an association with pit bulls and femininity, but the pit bulls themselves are also feminized and anthropomorphized through their placement and costumes.

In Figure 1, the pit bull (gender unknown) is dressed in a red and black tutu with bear ears and has a collar with a large red rose. The dog's paws are in the hands of the female model, demonstrating the friendliness of the dog. With the model and dog's matching elaborate costumes and positioning, it is assumed the two are representing the art of dance. Just as dance is a performative art, the pit bull is performing femininity through its appearance. With its open-mouthed smiling face, tutu, and headpiece, the dog is a mirror image of the female model (with her wide smile, dance costume, and feathered head adornment) and is thus a two-fold representative of femininity through mimicry and performance.

Unlike the pit bull in Figure 1, the pit bulls in Figures 2 and 3 are decorated with more masculine adornments including collared shirts and ties and a black beret cap. Although their clothing is a signifier for masculinity, the act of dressing up is a more feminine act which mitigates the masculinity presented in the clothes themselves. As a form of play, dressing up is associated with young children, particularly young girls. The costumes then are metonymic for innocence and children which are critical to building the image of a pit bull as a "family member."<sup>66</sup> The costumes also anthropomorphize the pit bulls, giving them human-like appearances. Through these costumes and the act of costuming, these photographs demonstrate passivity in pit bulls in that the dogs are able to be dressed by humans and placed in costumes. For a breed that has been portrayed as violent, aggressive, and unable to be rehabilitated, their

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

ability to not only be dressed up but also to stay dressed up for extended periods of time (as photography model shoots can often take hours to complete) shows docility.

It is imperative for those seeking to change the image of pit bulls to show them in a different context. In the Pinups for Pitbulls images, these dogs have not only been dressed up, but they are interacting closely with the female models, and they are placed in settings that connote intelligence, art, and beauty. As previously mentioned, the pit bull in Figure 1 is representing dance—a feminine and performative art. In Figure 2, the pit bulls are placed in an office setting. The setting for this photograph challenges not only the gendered representation of pit bulls but also the classed representation of the breed. Pit bulls have been associated with people with lower incomes and extreme urban and rural poverty. By showing the pit bull in an office which is a white-collar, middle-to-upper class setting, this pinup photo repositions pit bulls away from both a masculine and a low-class environment. Like Figure 1, Figure 3 shows a pit bull in a high art setting, in this case, in an art studio with two symbols of intellectual fine arts—a shelf of books and a painting-in-progress. By associating the pit bulls with beauty rather than utility, the photographs elevate the status of the pit bull. Additionally, similar to Figure 2's class status symbol, the pit bull in Figure 3 is wearing a beret and scarf which when combined become a synecdochal symbol for France. As evident in the names of two of the breeds associated with the pit bull label (the *American* Staffordshire Terrier and the *American* Pit Bull Terrier), the breed is not only raced, classed, and gendered, but also nationed. By adorning the pit bull with a symbol of France, the pit bull becomes transnational. Globally, Breed Specific Legislation bans are in effect against pit bulls not only in the United States but also in Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom, among others. This image then not only challenges the negative stereotypes of the pit bull in the United States but throughout the world. It is critical to note that the portraits'

altering of the traditionally stereotyped nation and gender of pit bulls does so in conjunction with white models. As Harlan Weaver argues in “Race, Class, Gender, and Nation in Culture of Dog Rescue and Dog Fighting” the “changes in [pit bulls’] relationships to the categories of race and nation”<sup>67</sup> are critical to their salvation as it affirms the dogs’ placement in “US American families and homes.”<sup>68</sup> These representations rely on connecting pit bulls away from their associations with “thugs” or “gangsters” (also classified as African American tropes) to “a tacit, normative whiteness.”<sup>69</sup> This connection to whiteness is presented not only through the white models but also through the activities in which they are engaged. These activities are Europeanized forms of high culture that are explicitly associated with white culture. The pit bulls are placed in scenarios that establish them as civilized dogs, completely separate of their hyper-masculine, African American, low-class stereotyped associations. Through this white, high-class, feminized representation, Pinups for Pitbulls becomes an international campaign to advocate for *pawsitive* pit bull promotion.

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<sup>67</sup> Weaver, “Becoming in Kind: Race,” 698.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.



Figure 1: 2010 PFPB Calendar Image<sup>70</sup>



Figure 2: 2009 PFPB Calendar Image<sup>71</sup>



Figure 3: Undated PFPB Calendar Image<sup>72</sup>

<sup>70</sup> Pinups for Pitbulls, Dancing Dogs, photograph, 2010.

<sup>71</sup> Gertrude & Mabel Photography and Pinups for Pitbulls, *Muggy & Lola*, photograph, February 9, 2010.

<sup>72</sup> Celeste Guiliano Photography and Pinups for Pitbulls, French Artist, photograph. 2013.

Like Deirdre ‘Little Darling’ Franklin, French award-winning photographer Sophie Gamand decided to utilize her talents as an artist to promote pit bulls. In the summer of 2014, Gamand began the project Flower Power: Pit Bulls of the Revolution. In this photography series, she photographs pit bulls up-for-adoption in animal shelters throughout the United States. In the portraits, she “decided to photograph [the pit bulls] with flower crowns, to infuse a softer energy into their imagery.”<sup>73</sup> In discussing her intentions for the series on her website, Gamand states she wants “this series to challenge the way we look at pit bull-type dogs, and ultimately the way we treat them.”<sup>74</sup> Prior to beginning the project, Gamand stated she “realized pit bulls were always portrayed in very urban, gritty photographs. The imagery associated with these dogs is often harsh, very contrasted, conveying the idea of them being tough. So [she] decided to challenge the way we look at these dogs by portraying him in soft, feminine images.”<sup>75</sup> In this statement, Gamand acknowledges the raced, classed, and gendered status of the pit bull that has permeated the national visual discourse for the breed, and she purposefully utilizes femininity to alter the public’s perception of pit bulls. Since 2014, Gamand has photographed a little over 250 pit bulls for her project which has since become a social media movement that can be followed with the hashtag #pitbullflowerpowerproject.<sup>76</sup> Gamand utilizes her photographs to serve multiple purposes in relation to pit bull advocacy as she photographs pit bulls who are up for adoption and uses her platform and photograph purchases to raise funds for pit bulls in need.

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<sup>73</sup> "Flower Power, Pit Bulls of the Revolution," Sophie Gamand Photography, accessed May 6, 2017.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.



Figure 4: Bodie<sup>77</sup>

Figure 4 is an example of Gamand using her photography to portray a pit bull who is up for adoption. Bodie, an eight-month-old puppy is the central focus of the photograph. This image was taken from Sophie Gamand's Facebook page on April 7, 2016. In the digital photograph, Bodie's light brown body is softly silhouetted against the cool-toned background which is comprised of light and dark pink and purple hues. Luminescent dots in the same color palette frame Bodie's body and enhance the photograph's medium value. Bodie's head is adorned with a large floral crown with pink and white flowers. As signifiers, the flowers and the pink/purple background color represent femininity, and Bodie is visually engulfed in a feminine representation. His masculinity is mitigated through the dominant female symbols. Gamand anchored the photograph with the caption, "Bodie in all his #PitBullFlowerPower glory! Pink is the new blue, btw. This 8 months old pup is available at Animal Haven and ready to mingle! He is energetic and will need to continue training to learn good manners. He is a lover and oh-so

<sup>77</sup> Sophie Gamand, *Bodie*, photograph, Facebook, April 7, 2015, accessed May 6, 2017.

adorable.”<sup>78</sup> In this anchorage, Gamand compliments Bodie by using traditional feminine qualities, calling him a “lover” and “adorable.” She also acknowledges the symbolic feminization of Bodie by stating, “Pink is the new blue.”<sup>79</sup> This statement is a double entendre, as it not only applies to Bodie’s image but also to Gamand’s purpose and the shift in feminizing pit bulls as a whole. By calling pink, a color symbolizing females, the new “blue,” a color symbolizing males, Gamand is calling femininity the new masculinity and appropriately describing the new gender shift in pit bull imagery.

Gamand’s photography is critical to the pit bull movement because she not only raises awareness for pit bull acceptance through feminization, but she also uses her platform to tangibly rather than conceptually assist pit bulls. In a recent Facebook post, Gamand posted a photograph of Kyla, a 14-week-old pit bull who will be available for adoption from Rebound Hounds. Kyla had a heart condition that required extensive surgery to repair. Without surgery to repair her heart, Kyla’s condition would have been fatal. Gamand not only photographed Kyla but she also placed a request on Facebook to her 50,000+ followers to donate money for Kyla’s surgery. On April 6, 2017, Gamand posted the following on her Facebook account:

“Thank you everyone who shared and donated! We did it! We raised the 5.5K that were missing for Kyla's surgery. I haven't heard from the rescue yet but my understanding is that Kyla has an appointment for early May (the specialist didn't have anything sooner). And she is on a wait list too! Things are looking better for this nugget! She will be up for adoption soon too! Kyla's #pitbullflowerpower portrait is now available in my store on prints and merchandise! Check [www.sophiegamand.com/store!](http://www.sophiegamand.com/store!)”<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Sophie Gamand, *Kyla*, photograph, *Facebook*, April 6, 2017, accessed May 6, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/SophieGamand/photos/a.495106407277079.1073741830.491814064272980/1246949638759415/?type=3&theater>.





Figure 5: Kyla<sup>81</sup>

As an artist, Gamand is using her photographs as a form of resistance to shift the national narrative for pit bulls. Gamand's success relies on her photographs, but much of the attention she has received was generated through social media, specifically Facebook. In creating visual images, social media has become one of the most powerful tools for those in pit bull advocacy.

### **Pit Bull Stars: Social Media Accounts of Pit Bulls**

According to the 2016 Pew Research Center, 68% of all U.S. adults use Facebook, 28% of all U.S. adults use Instagram, and a "majority of Americans now say they get news via social media."<sup>82</sup> While the news conglomerates in the 1980s developed the criminalized image of the pit bull through their sensationalized coverage, current pit bull owners and activists are using social media networks as their personal communication outlets to challenge and alter the raced, classed, and gendered images of pit bulls and show them in their everyday lives as pets of

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Shannon Greenwood, Andrew Perrin, and Maeve Duggan, "Social Media Update 2016: Facebook usage and engagement is on the rise, while adoption of other platforms holds steady," Pew Research Center, last modified November 11, 2016.

white<sup>83</sup> female owners. Although my analysis heavily focuses on the gendered representations of the pit bulls, it is important to note the race of the account operators/pit bull owners as the female identity is intersectional and not all female identities carry the same privileges. As white females, these owners have racial privileges which are presented in their accounts; henceforth, operating in dual identities, they challenge both the gendered and racialized identities of pit bulls.

### **Anthropomorphization: Person or Pit Bull?**

One of the most prominent themes in the Instagram accounts was the anthropomorphization of the pit bulls. The animals are anthropomorphized through clothing/adornments and setting. In the images, the pit bulls are dressed up in rain coats, hoodies, and sweaters, and they display a variety of accessories including hats, glasses, bowties, and necklaces, among others. Through these clothing and accessory choices, the female owners are portraying the pit bulls as individuals with unique personalities, rather than as collective members of a generic breed. These clothing items also invoke feelings of relatability between the audience and the pit bulls as some of the clothing and accessory choices reflect basic human desires--staying dry (raincoats), staying warm (sweaters), and being able to see clearly (glasses). As canines, these pit bulls cannot vocalize whether or not they are cold, wet, or going blind. Their owners can gain a general sense of their desires based on their pets' actions, such as scratching a door when they need to go outside or sitting by their food bowls when they are hungry, but by placing the pit bulls in clothing developed by humans and with the purpose of creating human comfort, these owners are making a statement that their pets are sentient beings who crave comfort.

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<sup>83</sup> The account owners do not self-identify their race on the Instagram accounts. My description of their racial identities as "white" is founded on my interpretation of their race based on visual images alone.

Figure 6<sup>84</sup>Figure 7<sup>85</sup>

In addition to their clothing, the settings of the images are also important as they “are clear examples of animals being used (intentionally, and not through inadvertent anthromorphism) to symbolize human identity and human values.” All of the accounts include images of their pit bulls “celebrating” holidays including their birthdays, Easter, Christmas, Independence Day, St. Patrick’s Day, and New Year’s Eve. These settings are significant because they demonstrate what is important to their pit bull owners, and by default, their owners’ culture—nation, religion, celebration, and community, as holidays are cultural signifiers that connect communities. In displaying their pit bulls as “celebrating” these holidays, these owners are demonstrating that pit bulls belong within U.S. culture and not within the margins. These images show pit bulls as being supportive of a nation that actively enacts public policies to restrict and/or euthanize

<sup>84</sup> Sookieandivy, Sookie in Rain Coat, photograph, *Instagram*, March 3, 2016, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BCg3op8Dmep/>.

<sup>85</sup> Journeyofnana, Nana in Pajamas, photograph, *Instagram*, January 22, 2017, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BP13bAIAyek/?taken-by=journeyofnana>.

members of their breed while displaying them as members of a community, and, most importantly, as members of a family. The birthday images taken by the female pit bull owners simultaneously serve as expressions of celebrations of life and survival for their pit bulls, for each pit bull saved, there are thousands killed in shelters. These holiday settings establish that pit bulls belong and are accepted into their white, female, middle-class culture.



Figure 8<sup>86</sup>



Figure 9<sup>87</sup>

In addition to forming individual pit bull identities and signifying pit bulls as members of a collective culture, the anthromorphism of the pit bulls specifically plays upon socially constructed identities grounded in race, class, and gender stereotypes. The Adventures of Malibu account was featured in an article on *The Dodo* in February 2017. The article discussed Malibu’s “mom,” Christine Smith, and her difficulties in fighting the stereotypes associated with pit bulls.

<sup>86</sup> Thewhitestpuppyouknow, Fourth of July, photograph, *Instagram*, July 4, 2016, accessed May 6, 2017, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BHddMimB5Li/?taken-by=thewhitestpuppyouknow&hl=en>.

<sup>87</sup> Sookieandivy, Birthday celebration, photograph, *Instagram*, February 19, 2016, [https://www.instagram.com/p/BB\\_NfX-jmYd/?taken-by=sookieandivy](https://www.instagram.com/p/BB_NfX-jmYd/?taken-by=sookieandivy).

In discussing her walks in southern California with Malibu, Smith noted that Malibu was being judged by passersby based on her breed, for:

"Every time I walked Malibu, we would experience people crossing to the other side of the street to avoid us," Smith said. "Small dog owners would pick up their dogs off the ground cradling them close, mothers would pull their children to the side with a death grip, all the while eyes focused on Malibu's every move. This broke my heart, knowing what a loving dog she is. I knew I had to try to change people's perception."<sup>88</sup>

Smith stated that when she was initially fostering Malibu, she would "dress her up in cute outfits to make her look more adoptable," so she decided to "dress up" Malibu in patterned bandanas to make her more approachable. Smith told *The Dodo* that she noticed an immediate change in peoples' perceptions of Malibu when she wore a bandana. She stated,

"People would smile when they looked at her. They would ask questions, what breed is she, how old is she, or just comment on how cute she was. Not everyone was accepting. However, this gave me the opportunity as her owner to communicate with them in a less stressful environment as the bandana made them actually look at her as just a dog, not as a breed."<sup>89</sup>

As a pit bull owner, Smith acknowledges her deployment of feminization as a tactic in that she intentionally will "dress up" Malibu in clothing and bandanas to make her more approachable. Smith also noted that once individuals engage with Malibu, she uses the opportunity to discuss pit bull myths, perceptions, and how those perceptions impact public policies for pit bulls. Rather than being seen as masculine and an aggressor, Malibu is described as "cute" with her bandanas, yet Smith's use of bandanas is a recontextualization of hip-hop and gang imagery.

### **Making the Urban the Suburban: The Recontextualization of Hip Hop Elements**

Although bandanas serve ubiquitous purposes, they are commonly utilized as gang symbols. In the 2004 hip-hop song "Drop it Like it's Hot," Snoop Dogg references this symbolism, singing, "I keep a blue flag hanging out my backside but only on the left side, yeah

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<sup>88</sup> Anders, "People Were," *The Dodo*.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

that's the Crip side.”<sup>90</sup> The “flag” most often used by gang members is a bandana. Smith is dually challenging the association of pit bulls with minority males in low-income, urban communities by owning a pit bull herself and by using those gang and/or hip-hop related symbols to feminize her pit bull.

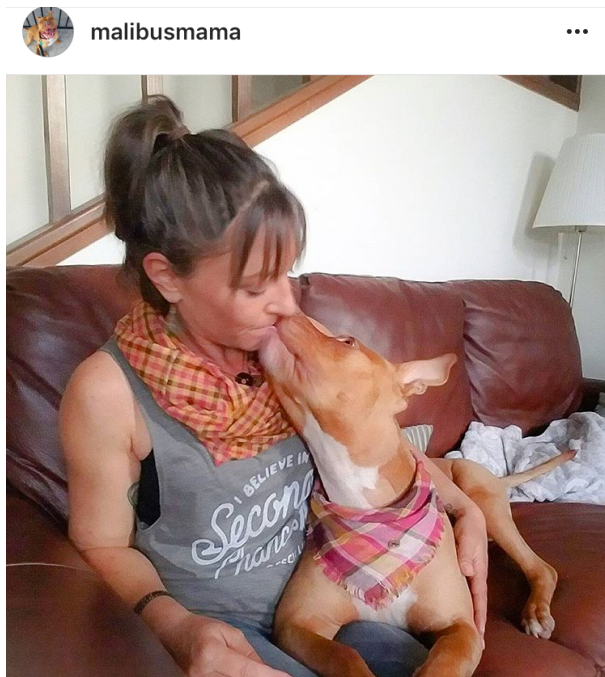


Figure 10<sup>91</sup>



Figure 11<sup>92</sup>

While Smith recontextualizes hip-hop elements, Mandy, Larry the Pitbull’s owner, appropriates hip-hop culture by dressing Larry in male urban streetwear. In a *Barkpost* article highlighting Larry the Pitbull’s influence on promoting positive pit bull imagery, the article includes an image of Larry dressed in an oversized hoodie with a flat-billed hat, sunglasses, and high-top sneakers. Sitting next to Larry is Boone, Mandy’s other dog, and a stuffed, white teddy

<sup>90</sup> "Drop it Like it's Hot," lyrics by Calvin Broadus, Chad Hugo, and Pharrell Williams, performed by Snoop Dogg, on *R&G (Rhythm & Gangsta): The Masterpiece*, Doggystyle Records, 2014, compact disc.

<sup>91</sup> Malibusmama, Malibu kisses, photograph, *Instagram*, February 22, 2017, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BQ1PiHfgXY4/?taken-by=malibusmama>.

<sup>92</sup> Malibusmama, St. Patrick's Day, photograph, *Instagram*, March 13, 2017, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BR1ONk2gVn2/?taken-by=malibusmama>.

bear. The juxtaposition of urban male minority imagery, a child's toy, and a cute dog without negative connotations nullifies the violence, aggression, and masculinity that is otherwise associated with the pit bull even though it makes clear connections to the identities that established those stereotypes. By appropriating hip-hop culture in a white, feminized space, Mandy's image of Larry seems almost satirical, as if Larry's place in a low-income urban community with minority males would be too implausible, even though it has been the reality for the past thirty years.

Not only do Larry and Malibu's accounts recontextualize hip hop culture, they also directly challenge pit bulls' association with that culture by constructing identities antithetical to those of hip hop figures. For example, in an image posted on October 3, 2015, Larry the Pitbull is pictured sitting in a sunny backyard wearing a black witch's hat and a fall-colored scarf. In his mouth, he is holding a sideways Starbucks cup. The picture was captioned, "Basic Witch" and tagged with the hashtags "#starbucks #halloween #basic #larrythedog." Without the anchor text, the image could be interpreted as another example of costuming—one that continues to play upon feminized representations as Larry is a male dog but dressed as a female witch. With the captions, however, Mandy makes it clear that Larry is also acting as an anthropomorphized image of the "Basic White Bitch" stereotype. As defined by Urban Dictionary, the "Basic White Bitch" stereotype describes "A white girl who loves ugg, Starbucks, leggings, white iPhones, selfies, instagram heart emojis, Forever 21, tank tops and flipping their thin hair."<sup>93</sup> This stereotype is assigned to young, white, heteronormative females from mid-to-upper level socioeconomic statuses. With the intentionally placed Starbucks cup and the caption "Basic Witch," Mandy is making clear that Larry is supposed to be in character as a "Basic White

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<sup>93</sup> Jasmine319, "Basic White Bitch," Urban Dictionary, last modified September 27, 2014, accessed May 6, 2017, <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Basic+White+Bitch>.

Bitch.” Mandy’s privilege as a white, heteronormative, middle-class<sup>94</sup> female allows Larry to dress as this character without question even though the raced, classed, and gendered image is antithetical to pit bulls’ characterizations in mass media. Mandy’s privilege reinforces the identity she has ascribed to the anthropomorphized Larry.



Figure 12<sup>95</sup>



Figure 13<sup>96</sup>

<sup>94</sup> While Mandy does not self-identify in Larry the Pitbull’s Instagram account, she notes in pictures that she is a veterinarian technician, and she included recent photographs of her wedding with her husband on the account.

<sup>95</sup> Lvrntafghtr, *Basic Witch*, photograph, *Instagram*, October 29, 2016, accessed May 11, 2017, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BMK0wcKhB9w/?taken-by=lvrntafghtr>.

<sup>96</sup> Nicole Zalat, "Don't Bully My Breed: Larry the Dog Promotes Pit Bull Ruv," *BarkPost*, last modified 2014, accessed May 11, 2017, <http://stories.barkpost.com/good/larry-the-dog/>.



### **Making Pits Lov-a-bull: Placement of Pit Bulls with Humans and Animals**

In addition to anthropomorphization, all of the Instagram accounts included images of the pitbulls with their owners and with other animals to show that the pit bulls were friendly and could get along well with animals and humans. Because of their associations with the blood sport of dog fighting, pit bulls are often portrayed as being vicious and unable to cohabitate with other animals or humans. In the six Instagram accounts, the pit bulls are pictured playing with, snuggling with, licking, and frolicking with other pit bulls or other dogs. These images contradict the dog fighting images perpetuated in the media and provide visual evidence to show that pit bulls can be friendly, playful, and most importantly, loving. Konrad Lorenz, one of the founders of ethology, termed the characteristics that make animals and/or humans appear “cuddly” such as large, round eyes, the kinderschema.<sup>97</sup> Lorenz believed that kinderschema triggered nurturing, positive feelings in human caretakers. With almond shaped-eyes and angled features, pit bulls’ physical appearances do not fit into the confines of this “cuddly” appearance, yet in the images with their owners, the pit bulls are portrayed as being “cuddly” animals by being the providers and/or receivers of physical acts of love to and/or from their owners. In the images with their owners, most of which are selfies or close front-facing shots, the pit bulls’ large, blocky heads are always in close proximity to their owners’ faces, creating a jarring binary of strength and fragility, hard angles and curves, and masculinity and femininity. In spite of these paradoxical appearances, the effect of care and nurture is apparent in the image. In the images, the dogs are snuggled next to their owners, licking their faces, or peering into the camera as a side-by-side profile image of their owner. These owners demonstrate in their pictures with their dogs that in spite of the pit bulls’ appearance not having kinderschema qualities, they are still worthy of being nurtured. In positioning the pit bulls so close to their faces, the owners brazenly defy the

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<sup>97</sup> Pit bull, 46

negative stereotypes associated with pit bulls and visually establish the pit bull as a preferred dog for white females. These images seek to convey the message that these pit bulls are not fighters being walked on heavy chains with spiked collars, for these pit bulls are being snuggled, adorned, and loved.

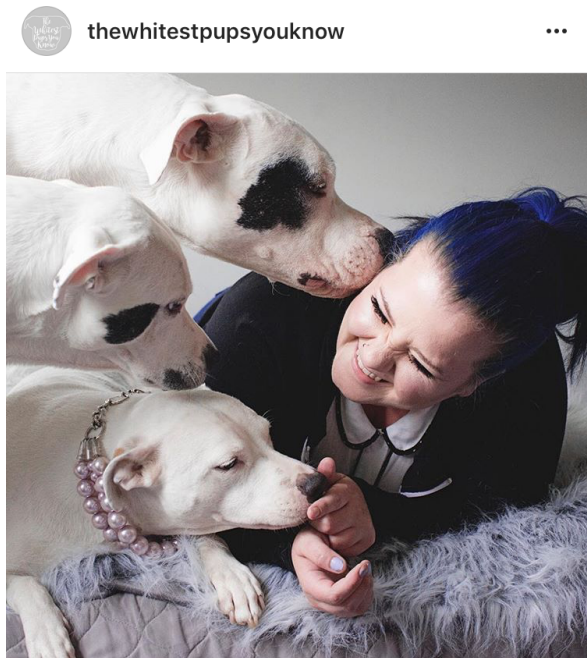


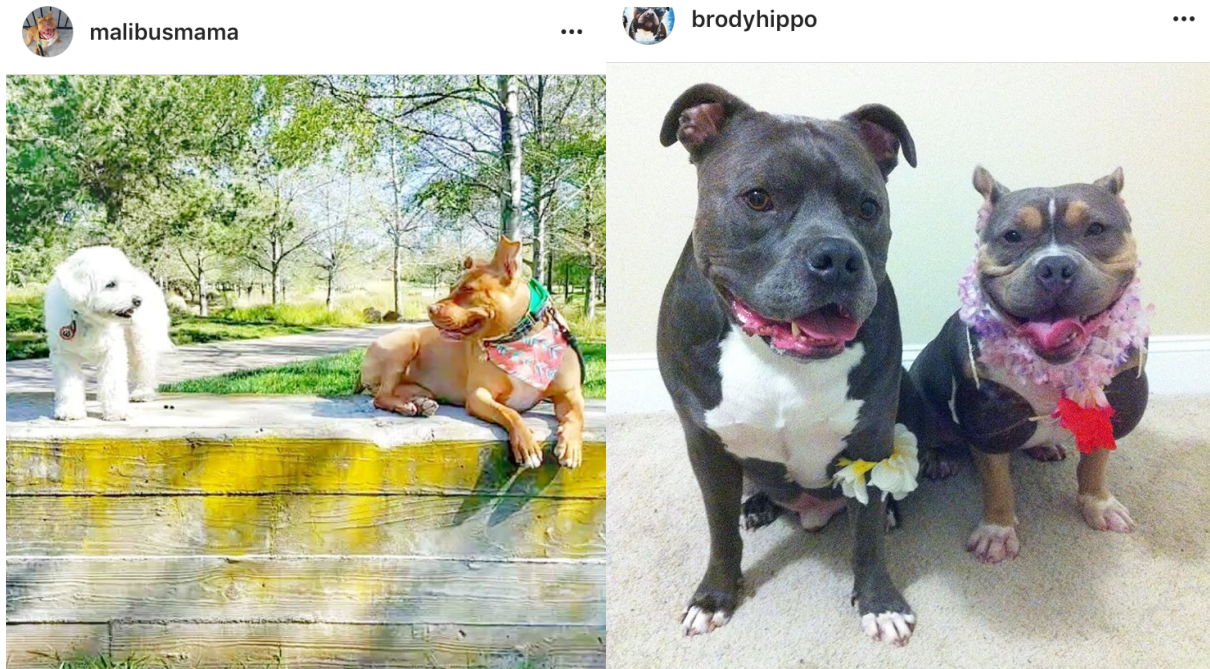
Figure 14<sup>98</sup>



Figure 15<sup>99</sup>

<sup>98</sup> thewhitestpuppyouknow, Pups with owner, photograph, *Instagram*, October 25, 2016, accessed May 6, 2017, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BMAVoV6hgnF/?taken-by=thewhitestpuppyouknow&hl=en>.

<sup>99</sup> lvrntafghtr, Mandy, Larry, and Boone, photograph, *Instagram*, March 23, 2017, accessed May 11, 2017, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BSAI8TiAaxH/?taken-by=lvrntafghtr>.

Figure 16<sup>100</sup>Figure 17<sup>101</sup>

### **Don't Bully My Breed: Pit Bull Advocacy and Consciousness-Raising**

The final theme presented in the social media accounts is pit bull advocacy and/or a raising of awareness. It is apparent that the Instagram account owners are aware that with thousands of followers, they have a platform to use their images to support organizations and missions that are dedicated to assisting pit bulls. In Larry the Pitbull's About Me section, Mandy writes that the account is dedicated to raising "pawsitive pit bull awareness." In Malibu's About Me section, Smith includes the statement "#endbsl" to demonstrate her dedication to ending breed-specific legislation against pit bulls. Both Brody and Sookie and Ivy's About Me includes "#adoptdontshop," drawing attention to rescuing animals from shelters rather than purchasing

<sup>100</sup> Malibusmama, Malibu and Frida, photograph, *Instagram*, March 2, 2017, accessed May 11, 2017, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BRJ0GkOgh4y/?taken-by=malibusmama>.

<sup>101</sup> Brodyhippo, Hula pit bulls, photograph, *Instagram*, April 3, 2016, accessed May 11, 2017, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BDwrub6ylam/?taken-by=brodyhippo>.

them from pet stores who use breeders, and Nana's page includes a link to the Stand Up For Pits foundation, a "501c3 non-profit dedicated to saving lives and ending the abuse and discrimination of Pit Bull "type" dogs (Pibbles) through live events, funds, education and advocacy."<sup>102</sup>

These owners not only include written declarations to their causes, but they also show it through their images. While all of the accounts are dedicated to pit bull causes, they each draw attention to various elements of pit bull advocacy. Some of the accounts provide updates on current legislation affecting pit bulls such as proposed or newly-approved breed specific legislation. Some of the accounts acts as brand representatives, publishing product-placement photos in which the pit bulls model bandanas, hoodies, and collars for either companies dedicating funds to rescues or rescues raising funds on their own accord through product sales. From the photographs, the values of the Instagram account owners are apparent as the products they represent are all connected to philanthropic efforts rather than pure product endorsement. In discussing using her Instagram account to support companies, Smith (Malibu's owner) stated:

"She is often asked to model for companies, however, we choose to only work with people who promote rescue and adoption and who give back a percentage to shelters and or rescues... We are thankful for our Instagram family in the rescue community who also support these businesses who speak out against abuse, neglect and breed discrimination."<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> "About," Stand Up for Pits, accessed May 6, 2017, <http://www.standupforpits.us/about-stand-up-for-pits/>.

<sup>103</sup> Anders, "People Were," *The Dodo*.



863 likes

lvrintafghtr Happy national pit bull awareness month! Educate, don't discriminate! #larrythedog #pitbull lovers take 40% off everything at store.larrythedog.com (link in bio) use code: PITBULL40

Figure 18<sup>104</sup>

brodyhippo



1,603 likes

brodyhippo The shelter that saved Fiona's life, @cohpitbullrescue, has an online store with cool stuff like these #deednotbreed bandanas! Check them out @cohpitbullrescue and show some love and

Figure 19<sup>105</sup>

thewhitestpupsyouknow



Liked by malibusmama, brodyhippo and 2,666 others

thewhitestpupsyouknow Together we stand to watch BSL fall. ❤️

<sup>104</sup> Lvrntafghtr, Pit Bull Awareness Month, photograph, *Instagram*, October 2, 2016, accessed May 11, 2017, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BLFIPxyh1Ll/?taken-by=lvrintafghtr>.

<sup>105</sup> Brodyhippo, Brody and Fiona, photograph, *Instagram*, April 17, 2017, accessed May 11, 2017, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BTAhodfjdbf/?taken-by=brodyhippo>.

Figure 20<sup>106</sup>

To these owners, their social media pit bull accounts are not purely “social,” for they are tools for these change agents to generate a grassroots narrative that challenges the hegemonic discourse around pit bulls. Through their images, these women demonstrate that the media’s representation of pit bulls as vicious, aggressive preferred pets of minority males in low-income urban communities is outdated, incorrect, and in need of a new narrative.

### “We all fight....everybody:” Feminizing Dog Fighting in Literature

In the photographic campaigns and social media accounts, the masculinity of pit bulls is challenged through feminized representations of pit bulls, but in Jesmyn Ward’s 2011 novel *Salvage the Bones*, the stereotypical representation of masculine pit bulls is deconstructed through the representation of a female prize-fighter pit bull named China. *Salvage the Bones* depicts the life of the Baptistes, an impoverished African American family in rural Mississippi, in the ten days leading up to and immediately following Hurricane Katrina. Esch, the family’s only daughter, who is fifteen-years-old and pregnant, narrates the novel. The reader is limited to her first-person-perspective as she recounts daily life for herself, her three brothers (Randall, Skeetah, and Junior), her father, and Skeetah’s prize-fighting pit bull, China. Operating within a Black feminist tradition, Ward uses China to challenge the construction of the Black patriarchal masculinity of China’s male owner while simultaneously, if not contradictorily, representing China as a maternal-figure and metaphor for Black motherhood. This jarring duality displayed in China as both a maternal figure to her owners and a killer pit bull not only distorts standard pit bull representations, but she (China) also challenges the mainstream perception of Black mothers

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<sup>106</sup> Thewhitestpuppyouknow, Dogs in BSL hoodies, photograph, *Instagram*, November 10, 2016, accessed May 6, 2017, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BMpwAaCBSzf/?taken-by=thewhitestpuppyouknow&hl=en>.

who were enslaved, exploited, socially and economically marginalized, and criminalized. Ward's text and her use of China as a representation for motherhood works within a Black feminist tradition to show how Black mothers have survived under intersectional oppression and how they have operated within spaces that have required them to be strong yet nurturing, hard but caring, and accepting of love and loss.

As a "sixty-five [pound],"<sup>107</sup> "cocaine white,"<sup>108</sup> prize-winning pit bull, China is automatically associated within a cultural context of masculinity due to her breed and role as a fighting dog, yet *Salvage the Bones* begins with China giving birth to her puppies thus foregrounding her female identity. As Esch describes the birth, however, she does so with aggressive language, describing what China is doing as "fighting, like she was born to do. Fight our shoes, fight other dogs, fight these puppies that are reaching for the outside, blind and wet."<sup>109</sup> In this text, the birth of puppies is juxtaposed against the destruction of items and dog fighting, associating life with death, and happiness with destruction. Ward's contradictory imagery blurs the hard binary between femininity and masculinity thus altering the reader's pre-conceived assumptions of China. She both gives life and takes it away, making her more than *solely* an archetypal violent pit bull, and Skeetah's Black masculinity is mitigated through her.

As a sixteen-year-old, African American male who fights pit bulls, Skeetah has the foundation for an archetypal Black patriarchal character, yet through his relationship with China and Esch, and compared to his brothers, Skeetah is depicted as a complex character and frequently placed in roles that require him to be both masculine and feminine. In the opening scene, Skeetah "serves as a midwife of sorts in the delivery, observing China's room to

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<sup>107</sup> Jesmyn Ward, *Salvage the Bones* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2011), 82, digital file.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 6

breathe.”<sup>110</sup> Although his focus on China’s successful delivery of puppies could be attributed to his need for the economic benefits the sale of pit bull puppies will bring, Esch notes that Skeetah is “focused on China like a man focuses on a woman when he feels that she is his, which China is.”<sup>111</sup> Even though Skeetah acts as a midwife to China, which is a feminine role, he does so while maintaining a male gaze towards China who is his. By caring for yet objectifying China, Skeetah transitions between femininity and masculinity, maneuvering between the role of a caretaker (female) and owner (male). In this context, China, as a female, is subjugated through Esch’s acknowledgment of Skeetah’s ownership of her, yet, later in the novel, Skeetah states the relationship “between man and dog” is “equal.”<sup>112</sup>

Just as the Instagram account owners use anthromorphization to feminize their pit bulls, Ward personifies China, placing emphasis on her human-like qualities and characteristics rather than her status as an animal. When describing China’s reactions to being attended to by Skeetah, Esch states, “She looks up and her whole body shimmies like a woman dancing down at the Oaks, a blues club set on six acres of woods and a baseball diamond in the middle of Bois”<sup>113</sup> and “She smiles lazily like a woman in a new Fourth of July outfit being complimented.”<sup>114</sup> Later in the text, when China is playing in a water hose, she is described as being “coy as a girl with a lollipop.”<sup>115</sup> By comparing China to human females, China becomes more than a dog—she is a representative of womanhood and motherhood. For Skeetah and Esch, China replaces the role of their deceased mother. As a pit bull, China is supposed to be threatening and aggressive, but she provides a sense of hope for the two children as she is their sole maternal figure. Skeetah

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<sup>110</sup> Mary Ruth Marotte, "Pregnancies, Storms, and Legacies of Loss in Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*," in *Ten Years after Katrina: Critical Perspectives of the Storm's Effect on American Culture and Identity*, ed. Mary Ruth Marotte and Glenn Jellenick (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington, 2015), 214.

<sup>111</sup> Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 7.

<sup>112</sup> Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 30.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.



cares for China as both his prize-fighting dog and also as a child he needs to care for and nurture—two actions he himself does not receive due to his mother’s death. After China’s puppies are born, Manny, Esch’s baby’s father and a friend of the family, says China is “weak” now because she had puppies. In response, Skeetah states, “You serious? That’s when they come into strength. They got something to protect....That’s power.”<sup>116</sup> In this statement, Skeetah not only acknowledges the strength of women, but he goes so far as to argue that through childbirth, through femininity, women, especially China, become stronger and more powerful. Skeetah’s comments about China represent Skeetah’s feelings towards Black mothers, which in turn, provide reassurance to Esch as Esch learns to be a mother through China.

Although Skeetah recognizes female strength, Ward complicates the narrative by reminding readers that he is a dogfighter—a hyper-masculine identity—and in that role, he places China at risk for his own pride. In the novel, Rico, the owner of the dog who mated with China wants a puppy from the litter, but Skeetah refuses to give him one. Rico then offers to hold a dogfight for the puppy, and if he wins, he keeps a puppy. Randall vehemently opposes the fight, reminding Skeetah that she is nursing and the puppies are fully reliant on her in order to survive. In response, Skeetah states, “We all fight....everybody.”<sup>117</sup> Skeetah’s placement of his pride over China’s role as a mother subjugates China as she is his and must do as he desires, regardless of what she could potentially lose (her life and puppies). Marotte argues this scene “deconstructs successfully an reader’s understanding of the relationship between fighting dog and owner in the way that Ward demonstrates how keenly complicated and emotionally-charged this relationship is.”<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>118</sup> Marotte, "Pregnancies, Storms, and Legacies," in *Ten Years after Katrina*, 214.

It could be argued that through her representation of China, Ward is perpetuating the negative stereotypes of pit bulls as China, as represented both in descriptions and through her actions, can be aggressive and deadly. I intentionally utilize Ward's text, however, not as a paragon example for a positive representation of pit bulls but as an example of a gendered representation of a pit bull that challenges the traditional masculine/feminine binary. Although China kills her own puppy and fights Kilo, she is also a maternal figure to Esch, Randall, Skeetah, and Junior, and she is frequently described in relation to the deceased mother. The "recurring theme of motherhood and giving birth, an integral part of the female role, is found throughout *Salvage the Bones*. It is about Mama, China, and Esch. Mama died giving birth to Junior, leaving all four children motherless. China gave birth and clearly has some postpartum issues. Esch is pregnant and looks forward to being a mother."<sup>119</sup> In China, "Ward presents a creature whose fortitude as a mother, companion, and fighter prove empowering to the Baptiste family, especially in the particularly dark days that the novel charts."<sup>120</sup>

China's role within the family is complex, and her representation as a maternal figure is multi-faceted, for in addition to acting as a mother and companion, China also represents the commodification and exploitation of Black mothers. Beginning with the establishment of slavery and continuing with the U.S. capitalist system, Black mothers have been subjugated to labor roles that are "economically exploitative, physically demanding, and intellectually deadening."<sup>121</sup> In addition to their paid labor statuses, they have also been tasked with contributing "to their families' well-being, such as keeping families together and teaching children survival skills," also known as unpaid labor. Skeetah's primary purpose in acquiring China as a pet is for

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<sup>119</sup> Mamie E. Locke, "Of Fury And Furies: Female Roles In *Salvage The Bones*," *Notes on American Literature* 22 (2013): 17.

<sup>120</sup> Marotte, "Pregnancies, Storms, and Legacies," in *Ten Years after Katrina*, 213.

<sup>121</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, "Work, Family, and Black Women's Oppression" in *Back Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 54.

financial reasons. Skeetah uses China's fertility and fighting abilities for economic gain. In this role, China operates as a symbol of the commodification of the Black female body during slavery as "enslaved African-American women's labor benefited their owners"<sup>122</sup> and Black women's "sexuality and fertility [were controlled through a] system of capitalist exploitation."<sup>123</sup> And yet, although she is exploited, China is still supposed to function as a maternal figure to the same people who have commodified her thus placing her in the role of Black women who are consistently completing tasks of paid and unpaid labor. Within this framework, China is feminized and humanized to show how Black mothers have been marginalized and exploited. Ward's representation of China and Esch, as another future female Black mother, adds to the literary canon of Black feminist literature and varying representations of Black women. As Patricia Hill Collins notes, "There has never been a uniformity of experience among African-American women, a situation that is more noticeable today. What remains as a challenge to Black feminist thinkers, working-class and middle-class alike, is to analyze how these new structures of oppression differentially affect Black women."<sup>124</sup>

In addition to deconstructing the roles of Black motherhood, *Salvage the Bones* also deviates from the standard representations of men who participate in dog fighting, for even though Skeetah is a dog-fighter, Ward's text demonstrates that "men's relationships with their dogs explicitly incorporate an affect often tied to family: love."<sup>125</sup> In describing her own experiences with pit bulls, Ward notes the oftentimes difficult and antithetical relationships with pit bulls used for fighting, stating,

My father owned pit bulls when I was young. He sometimes fought them. My brother and a lot of the men in my community owned pit bulls as well: sometimes they fought them

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>125</sup> Weaver, "Becoming in Kind?: Race," 700.

for honor, never for money. My father's favorite and sole pit bull was so dear to us that sometimes it was my babysitter; I remember sitting in our dirt driveway as a six-year-old crying because I was alone while that dog licked me. But then I also remember the dog fighting, and being incredible fierce.<sup>126</sup>

As Ward's statement shows, dog fighting, while both illegal and inhumane, is unfortunately still present in the United States. *Salvage the Bones* then is realistic, and it is through her portrayal of China that Ward shows the complexities of dogs who are capable of loving and being loved even though they are bred and forced to fight. Through her inclusion of a pit bull as a main character, Ward also draws attention to the intersections of race and class as they relate to pit bulls and how their environment dictates how society views their value as pets.

At the end of the novel, as the hurricane's full force is bearing down upon the Baptiste home, Skeetah, who had positioned China in a sling across his side, must relinquish his hold on her to save Esch. He watches as China "[spins] away in the relentless water,"<sup>127</sup> knowing he is unable to save her. In *Salvage the Bones*, China operates as symbol for hope and redemption both literally and figuratively. After China is lost in the storm, the Baptiste family awaits her return as the novel ends with Esch's reflection, "China. She will return, standing tall and straight, the milk burned out of her. She will look down on the circle of light we have made in the Pit, and she will know that I have kept watch, that I have fought."<sup>128</sup> To the Baptiste family, China's return is symbolic of their survival and their strength, but China also operates as a signifier for redemption—not just for the family but also for pit bulls as a breed. China's feminization and role as a surrogate mother to the Baptiste family establishes the foundation for her to be rehabilitated even though she is a fighting dog as her feminine qualities create a narrative of love. Although complex, Ward's feminization of China and subsequently Skeetah is a challenge

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<sup>126</sup> Elizabeth Hoover, "Jesmyn Ward on 'Salvage the Bones'," *The Paris Review*, August 30, 2011, accessed April 24, 2016.

<sup>127</sup> Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 187.

<sup>128</sup> Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 204-205.

to a completely masculinized characterization and a depiction of the strength in subjugated Black mothers.

### **Conclusion: Why It Matters: Feminization as a Rescue Tactic**

Each year in the United States, “1.2 million dogs are euthanized, approximately 40% of whom are Pit Bulls. This means that nearly half a million Pit Bull-type dogs are killed in shelters annually. Of all the common dog types to appear in shelters, Pit Bulls are by far the most likely to be euthanized, while they’re only the third most likely to be adopted.”<sup>129</sup> While animal rescue groups dedicated to saving pit bulls fervently advocate for the breed, they are often so limited in volunteers and funds yet consistently being inundated with requests to save pit bulls that they are working in reactionary modes, focusing on getting pit bulls out of dire situations, providing them with medical attention, shelter, etc. While these reactionary efforts are critical to saving pit bulls, they do not change the culture for pit bulls. What is the purpose in pulling pit bulls from shelters and euthanasia lists for them to only be housed in rescue facilities because people are still unable or unwilling to adopt them? In order for pit bulls to be saved and rehomed successfully, animal rescue organizations, advocates, and artists have to work cohesively and proactively to shift the national narrative of pit bulls. Through feminization, artists, advocates, and rescuers are changing the image of the pit bull from a violent, aggressive dog to a family-friendly breed by connecting the pit bull to connotative and denotative associations of femininity. While their methods and tactics in producing visual and literary discourses are all different, all of these women share a sentiment of arguing for the pit bull as a dog of love. Their feminization of pit bulls is a new approach that serves as a rescue tactic to promote positive images of pit bulls to create a sustainable culture that increases the number of pit bull adoptions and decreases the

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<sup>129</sup> Benjamin Moore, ed., “Here’s Why You See So Many Pit Bulls In Shelters,” *BarkPost*, last modified May 2015, accessed May 6, 2017.

disproportionately high number of pit bulls killed annually due to a negative representation and misjudged breed.

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