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NOTES TOWARD A FERAL POETICS

About 300 feral ponies inhabit Assateague, a small and narrow barrier island off the coasts of Maryland and Virginia.



Figure 1 Aerial view of Assateague Island on the Atlantic Ocean in Maryland, USA.

Although the precise nature of how the ponies came to live on Assateague remains a mystery, a popular legend suggests that the ponies are descendants of horses that escaped from a shipwrecked Spanish galleon in the 16th century. However they arrived, the horses adapted to the harsh island conditions – developing distinct characteristics — and thrived.



Figure 2 Horses, Assateague State Park, Maryland, USA

In this paper/presentation—part of a continuing project that meditates upon the politics of interspecies affiliations, affinities, and alliances—I explore a series of interrelated questions provoked by the Assateague ponies.

- How might a feral poetics expand our notion of what a text can do, and how might it trouble categories such as "wild," "tame," and "domestic"?
- How can we draw upon this allegory to better understand how feral texts – texts that challenge literary traditions, historical narratives, habits of thought, and/or other political and social constructs –might call new communities, particularly feminist and queer communities, into being?
- And how can we use this story of feral marronage as a model for community-building and artistic, poetic, and/or pedagogical practice?

I enlist a variety of creatures and thinkers to help guide this inquiry, including the Assateague Ponies, Shrek the sheep, Fanny Howe, Audre Lorde, Donna Haraway, Claudia Rankine, Maggie Nelson, Marguerite Duras, and Trinh T. Minh-ha . Finally, I consider the work of Bhanu Kapil: in particular, her book *Humanimal*, which both depicts and enacts the “feral.”

WHAT IS FERAL?

Before looking at specific creatures or texts, I’d like to outline how I have come to think of the “feral”: a descriptive term informed by, but also in tension with, scientific and artistic taxonomies.

OBSERVATIONS:

- A feral creature or poetics mutates in ways that may be loosely understood as transitions, deviations, or departures from “controlled” to “uncontrolled” or “modified” to “unmodified.” One could also describe these changes thusly:
 - domesticated -> un-domesticated
 - cultivated -> uncultivated
 - Kept/contained/captive -> un-kept/uncontained/free
- A feral creature or poetics may undergo or pursue these changes/transitions for various reasons including:
 - Abandonment/Neglect
 - Accidental loss
 - Release
 - Escape
 - Natural disaster
 - Political or economic conflict or collapse
- A creature or poetics may enter a feral state voluntarily or involuntarily. That is to say, a species or poetics may become feral because it wants to OR because it has to/is the best option for survival/thriving.
- Feral creatures and poetics often emerge/exist in spaces adjacent to narratives of human oppression: colonialism, imperialism, classism, racism, sexism, homophobia, and militarism.
- A feral poetics or creature may or may not be aware of its ferality.
- A feral poetics or creature may or may not be interested in sustainability.

- A feral poetics or creature may or may not be _____.

WHAT FERAL IS *NOT*:

- Another word for “wild”
 - A feral creature or poetics is neither “wild” nor “tame”; “ferality,” however, engages these notions.
 - Zoologists generally do not label as “feral” animals that were genuinely “wild” before they escaped from captivity (for example, lions).
- Another word for “experimental”
 - A feral poetics may also be an experimental poetics, but many types of experimental poetics are not feral.
 - Which is to say, many experiments are (often self-conscious) engagements with patriarchal and patrilinear traditions and received forms, ideas, or values.

AN IMPORTANT NOTE: HOW I’VE SELECTED WHAT I’VE CHOSEN TO CLASSIFY AS DISPLAYING A “FERAL POETICS”

Although I have been experimenting with this term for a long time, it has been challenging for me to come up with a list of characteristics that do not feel to be simply tautological or engaged with flat binaries. Thus, it seems important that I note the degree to which I’ve allowed – or perhaps more, aptly, embraced – the subjective experience of reading or listening to guide the detection of what I call “feral.” In each case, I’ve begun simply by paying attention to how a text makes me feel: for me, the marking of a text/poetics as “feral” is often

mapped to a set of affective experiences. So, to add to the qualities previously described, I offer an incomplete but (I hope) representative list of the way these texts make me feel. Then, I try to identify what features make me feel that way (examples of each are offered in endnotes).

The texts I call “feral” tend to elicit the following feelings:

- Empathy
- Relief
- Gratitude
- Hope
- Affinity

The textual features that tend to elicit these feelings may be traced to the following:

- Acts/descriptions of profound or disruptive volition¹
- Acts/descriptions of radical subjectivity²
- Acts or descriptions of unlearning as a form of resistance³
- Act/descriptions of public displays of affect (PDA)⁴
- Cross-species or interspecies alliances and/or affiliations⁵
- Disrupted, altered, or new temporalities, histories, futures, or landscapes⁶
- Permission to self-define via negation or regression⁷
- Liminality⁸
- The presence of hybrid creatures/monsters⁹
- Descriptions of writing or reading as transformation.¹⁰
- Wishes for new types of language, writing, sentences, grammar, or syntax¹¹
- Writing as body or the body as text¹²

A feral poetics gestures toward making room, first, perhaps, for self, but ultimately for others.

FERAL CREATURES, FERAL TEXTS

I. Assateague Ponies

Physically, the Assateague ponies display a number of unique characteristics. They have long, silky manes and tails. Because of the soft island sand, their hooves grow long. As a result of their low-nutrient diet of marsh grass, they are small in stature. But they are also sturdy: “Horses tough enough to survive the scorching heat, abundant mosquitoes, stormy weather and poor quality food found on this remote, windswept barrier island have formed a unique wild horse society.” (“Assateague’s Wild Horses”)



Figure 3 Feral Pony at Assateague Island National Seashore, MD

II. Shrek the sheep

Shrek, a Merino sheep, became famous after escaping his enclosure and evading the shearers for six years by hiding in caves on New Zealand's South Island. When he was caught in 2004, he had grown a mammoth 60-pound fleece.



Figure 4 Shrek the Sheep with 60 lbs of wool

III. Bhanu Kapil's HUMANIMAL: A PROJECT FOR FUTURE CHILDREN

Bhanu Kapil's book *HUMANIMAL: A PROJECT FOR FUTURE CHILDREN* is both an enactment and a document of the feral. Kapil's source text, the diary of an Indian missionary, Reverend Joseph Singh, recounts the discovery and subsequent capture of Kamala and Amala, two girls found living with wolves in Bengal, India, in 1920. Kapil herself travels to the places where the girls lived, and through the telling of their story interweaves her own.

From the very beginning, *Humanimal* is a feral text. On the first page, Kapil describes the writing of the book as occurring in two spaces. These two spaces are described as "blue sky fiction" and a space "...real in different ways." Reflecting on these two spaces she writes:

I was frightened, and so I stopped. There were two kiosks like hard bubbles selling tickets to the show. A feral child is freakish. With all my strength, I pushed the glass door shut, ignoring the screams of the vendors inside, with a click. I clicked the spaces closed and then, because I had to, because the glass broke, I wrote this. (1)

Kapil's negotiation, navigation, and conflation of these two spaces mark the movement or transition towards the feral, as does the disclosure that she "had to" write the book. In this moment, Kapil makes transparent the tension between the feelings of wanting and needing, and the act of writing itself is presented as having a curious relationship to intentionality; the traditional idea/role of the author is declined and another, different sort of role emerges. This collapsing of boundaries echoes the collapsing of other types of spaces: the spaces between species, countries, languages, histories, and voices.

Humanimal is a book of multiple voices, and this polyvocality is demarcated typographically in the text itself. Different voices are indicated by different fonts of different weights and sizes. And although the book may be navigated in a linear fashion, the various typographical features allow different voices/viewpoints/temporalities to simultaneously co-exist in the spatial landscape of the page. Although this technique of using different fonts to indicate this type of multiplicity or simultaneity is a potential of any book, it is not a convention. And although the technique of using multiple typefaces is by no means unprecedented, its use here is in support of ferality. It is similar to the way the Assateague ponies or Shrek will have physical differences/adaptations because of dislocation/relocation. Formally, the typographical features are an indication of the text's feral poetics, as are its gesture towards a narrative that is multiple, discursive, and inhabited by a variety of voices and creatures.

Emerging from the text like a ghost—a feral creature moving among the sentences—is the story of Kapil’s father, his childhood in India, and descriptions of physical and colonial and racial trauma. These meditations on the life of her father and its adjacent narratives run like a counter-stitch or under-current to the passages that document Kamala and Amala’s transitions from animal to girl, free to kept, wild to domesticated. These transitions, and their accompanying feelings, can be violent and painful and often leave somatic markers.

Humanimal is rife with descriptions of how transition and trauma mark and alter the body. Kamala and Amala’s bodies are scraped and straightened. Their somatic alterations are juxtaposed with the silver scars of Kapil’s own father. In one passage, Kapil remembers a time at the beach in Wales.

Your legs were frankly an embarrassment: visible chunks of flesh taken from your thighs and shins at another point in history. Mummy’s bright yellow sari with its schizophrenic border of green and black zig-zags, and so on. Only in the water were you and I a family: colorless, wavy and child-centered. Invisible to the eyes of other families. Do you remember? (51)

The “schizophrenic border” of the mother’s sari is an echo of the other borders Kapil’s writing throws into harsh relief: those of racial and ethnic identity, the borders created by the body, land, sea, and sky. Once in the water – an interstitial, borderless space – Kapil describes them not only as a family, but also as “colorless” and “invisible.”

The *Humanimal* body is also a map. Along with grainy black and white photographs of Kamala and Amala, Kapil includes an image of her father’s scarred leg super-imposed onto a map of London, streets running parallel to a long, silver scar. This text-body-map extends

beyond the boundaries invented or controlled by politics or weather. The feral text, like a feral creature, calls into being alternate and possible bodies and histories. It invents a future and dares to stage or resurrect interventions that trouble historical and political narratives: perhaps reclaiming them or returning them or articulating them so as to revivify the subjects, those whose personal histories are meant to be contained or made invisible by larger narratives of nation, state, and species.

Reading Kapil's work, I feel as though another world is possible. I feel unalone in my affinities for the animal, in my frustration with the alphabet. As Fanny Howe notes, "language, as we have it fails to deal with confusion" (14). But what if confusion is the goal, and language, rather than failing us, might be adapted to be, as Kapil aspires "a dark mirror of writing" (54). I imagine this to be a magic mirror -- one that both reveals, challenges, and makes distortions and alterations so that through it, we -- or perhaps even our world -- might be altered. It suggests that we, by being transformed, may also enact transformations. Like Shrek, this might be a gesture of resistance, symbolized by a fluffy but weighty halo of fleecy wool.

Feral writing offers us an opportunity to find ourselves and each other; it allows us to realize, imagine, or create a shared and common shore. It prepares us for harsh conditions and marks – mourns, honors, or celebrates – the transformations we have already undergone in order to be here. It counters the forces that otherwise obliterate or obscure or make various forms of resistance or discourse seem unavailable.

NOTES

¹¹ Claudia Rankine: Or one begins asking oneself that same question differently. Am I dead? Though this question at no time explicitly translates into Should I be dead, eventually the suicide hotline is called. You are, as usual, watching television, the eight-o'clock movie, when a number flashes on the screen: I-800-SUICIDE. You dial the number. Do you feel like killing yourself? the man on the other end of the receiver asks. You tell him, I feel like I am already dead. When he makes no response you add, I am in death's position. He finally says, Don't believe what you are thinking and feeling. Then he asks, Where do you live?

Fifteen minutes later the doorbell rings. You explain to the ambulance attendant that you had a momentary lapse of happily. The noun, happiness, is a static state of some Platonic ideal you know better than to pursue. Your modifying process had happily or unhappily experienced a momentary pause. This kind of thing happens, perhaps is still happening. He shrugs and in turn explains that you need to come quietly or he will have to restrain you. If he is forced to restrain you, he will have to report that he is forced to restrain you. It is this simple: Resistance will only make matters more difficult. Any resistance will only make matters worse. By law, I will have to restrain you. His tone suggests that you should try to understand the difficulty in which he finds himself. This is further disorienting. I am fine! Can't you see that! You climb into the ambulance unassisted. (7)

² Audre Lorde: "And of course I am afraid, because the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger." (42)
Claudia Rankine: "She says, as if to anyone, It's hard to live now." (113)

³ Trinh T. Minh-ha: "Elsewhere, in every corner of the world, there exist women who, despite the threat of rejection, resolutely work toward the unlearning of institutionalized languages, while staying alert to every deflection of their body compass needles.... You who understand the dehumanization of forced removal-relocation-reeducation-redefinition, the humiliation of having to falsify your own reality, your voice – you know. And often cannot say it. You try and keep on trying to unsay it, for if you don't, they will not fail to fill in the blanks on your behalf, and you will be said." (80)

Audre Lorde: "And putting yourself on the line is like killing a piece of yourself, in the sense that you have to kill, end, destroy something familiar and dependable, so that something new can come, in ourselves, in our world." (107)

⁴ Maggie Nelson: "Last night I wept in a way I haven't wept for sometime. I wept until I aged myself. I watched it happen in the mirror. ...I recognized this as a rite of decadence, but I did not know how to stop it." (34)

Claudia Rankine: "We sit on the floor of public places, our faces wet." (61)

⁵ Donna Haraway: "To knot companion and species together in encounter, in regard and respect, is to enter the world of becoming with, where *who and what are* is precisely what is at stake." (19)
Maggie Nelson: "When I see photos of the blue bower, I feel so much desire that I wonder if I might have been born into the wrong species." (27)

⁶ Bhanu Kapil: “In this way, I wrote until the children left the jungle, the country itself, their families of origin, and time.” (42)

Audre Lorde: “All our children are outriders for a queendom not yet assured.” (73)

Trinh T. Minh-ha: “The story never stops beginning or ending. It appears headless and bottomless for it is built on differences. Its (in)finity subverts every notion of completeness and its form remains a non-totalizable one. The differences it brings about are difference not on in structure, in the play of structure and or surfaces, but also in timbre and in silence. We – you and me, she and he, we and they – we differ in the content of the words, in the construction and weaving of sentences but most of all, I feel, in the choice and mixing of utterances, the ethos, the tones, the paces, the cuts, the pauses. The story circulates like a gift; an empty gift which anybody can lay claim to be filling it to taste, yet can never truly possess. A gift built on multiplicity. One that stays inexhaustible within its own limits. Its departures and arrivals. Its quietness.” (2)

⁷ Maggie Nelson: “But I had no money. So I applied for grant, describing how exciting, how original, how necessary my exploration of blue would be. In one application, written and sent late at night to a conservative Ivy League university, I described myself and my project as heathen, hedonistic, and horny. I never got any funding.” (26)

Marguerite Duras: “This is what makes writing wild. One returns to a savage state from before life itself. And one can always recognize it: it’s the savageness of forests, as ancient as time. It is the fear of everything, distinct and inseparable from life itself. ...It’s an odd thing – not only writing, the written word, but also the howls of animals in the nights, of everyone, of you and me, of dogs. It’s the massive, appalling vulgarity of society.” (10)

Donna Haraway: “I never wanted to be posthuman, or posthumanist, any more than I wanted to be postfeminist. For one thing, urgent work still remains to be done in reference to those who must inhabit the troubled categories of woman and human, properly pluralized, reformulated, and brought into constitutive intersection with asymmetrical differences.” (17)

⁸ Bhanu Kapil: “The edge of the jungle is not the place where the line shifts the most. That is deeper in where the caves are, pink with bones.” (62)

Fanny Howe: “A signal does not necessarily mean that you want to be located or described. It can mean that you want to be known as Unlocateable and Hidden.” (6)

Audre Lorde: “And that sense of writing at the edge, out of urgency, not because you choose it but because you have to, that sense of survival – that’s what the poem is out of... Once you live any piece of your vision it opens you to constant onslaught. Of necessities, of horrors, but of wonders too, of possibilities.” (107)

⁹ Fanny Howe: “A prisoner or a patient becomes a double monster – despised and then despising of self and others, unless she can redraw the content of the experience, and give it a new name.” (62)

Marguerite Duras: “The precision of the moment of death relates to coexistence with humans, with colonized populations, with the fabulous mass of strangers in the world, of people alone, or universal solitude. Life is everywhere. From bacteria to elephants. From earth to the divine heavens of to those already dead.” (24)

Bhanu Kapil: “Is this the humanimal question? No, it’s a disc, transferring light from corner to corner of the girl’s eye. Like an animal tapetum. The way at night an animal. Animal eyes, glinting, in the room where he kept her, his girl, deep in the Home.” (14)

¹⁰ Claudia Rankine: “Sometimes you read something and a thought that was floating around in your veins organizes itself into the sentence that reflects it. This might also be a form of dreaming.” (127)

¹¹ Fanny Howe: “The dream of coming on new grammatical structures, a new alphabet, even a new way of reading, goes on—almost as a way to create a new human. One who could jump and fly at the same moment.” (14)

Audre Lorde: “Each of us is here now because in one way or another we share a commitment to language and the power of language, and to the reclaiming of that language which has been made to work against us.” (43)

¹² Donna Haraway: “Autopoiesis is self-making, in which self-maintaining entities (the smallest biological unit of which is a living cell) develop and sustain their own form, drawing on the enveloping flows of matter and energy.” (32)

Bhanu Kapil: “I wanted to write until they were real. When they began to breathe, opening their mouths in the space next to writing, I stopped writing.” (41)

Bhanu Kapil: “My father dies young, in his fifties, through the doctor told me privately that his body was clearly ravaged by the debilitating effects of poverty, early malnutrition and the multiple musculo-skeletal traumas that he appeared to have sustained as a child.” (53)

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IMAGE SOURCES

Figure 1: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Assateague_Island_aerial_view.jpg

Susanne Bledsoe, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

Figure 2: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Assateague_fg02.jpg

Horses, Assateague State Park, Maryland, USA

Fritz Geller-Grimm

Figure 3: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Wild_Pony_at_Assateague.jpg

Figure 4: <http://www.sheep101.info/famousheep.html>