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Conference on Ecopoetics
February 21-24, 2013
University of California, Berkeley

Troubling the Field: Feral Poetics, Feminism, and the Politics of the Anti-Pastoral

Representations of nature and creaturely life, both in poetry and in the language of environmentalism, remain haunted by the pastoral tradition. As a feminist, I am often concerned by the tacit acceptance of a pastoral frame in writing about nature. In my work as a writer and reader, I have experimented with a feral poetics as way to trouble pastoralism's duplicitous and highly gendered fantasies of nature as "wild," "pure," "unpopulated," and outside of historical and political time. A feral poetics destabilizes these fantasies, and feral texts articulate and recover the subjects otherwise contained or made invisible by pastoralism's narratives of nature, nation, state, and species. Ferality is a process, not a state of being: one cannot be born feral. A creature or poetics becomes feral because it has to or because it wants to.

In this presentation—part of a continuing project that meditates upon the politics of interspecies affiliations, affinities, and alliances—I outline the contours of a feral poetics, situating it as both an aesthetic and scholarly project of refusing/resisting pastoralism, recalling that pastoralism has often served as the warrant for settler colonialism, racism, and imperialism. In light of a feral poetics, writers, thinkers, and creatures as diverse as Bhanu Kapil, Claudia Rankine, Bernadette Mayer, Donna Haraway, Elizabeth Grosz, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Audre Lorde, Lorine Niedecker, Emily Dickinson, the feral ponies of Assateague Island and New Zealand's celebrity ovine "Shrek" the sheep can be seen as co-conspirators in a common endeavor.

i. The Pastoral Tradition

The etymology of the word pastoral is rooted in the idea of the shepherd, literally the "feeder and giver of pasture." This image of the shepherd as feeder illustrates its connections to both the farmer/gardener and the pastor/minister/priest in the judeo-christian tradition. Traditionally, the pastoral poet seeks to understand and cultivate his or her relationship to the natural world because it offers a sort of spiritual or metaphysical sense of wholeness.

Some of the defining features of the pastoral:

- Landscape as the setting for song
- A longing for an Edenesque or idyllic landscape that represents innocence and harmony
- A mode of viewing common experience through the medium of rural life (and thus critiquing urban life)
- Metaphor of poem as garden

The world rendered in the traditional pastoral poem has been described as the "via media," a kind of Arcadian middle landscape. Contemporary practitioners of the pastoral often conjure this mirage of an edenesque garden as a way to illustrate the ways in which modern, urban life has disrupted our opportunities to live in harmony with nature. Many contemporary pastorals, perhaps in light of the environmental crisis, mourn the garden that has been spoiled. This sense of disharmony and conflict is not new to the pastoral. In fact the very notion of a middle

landscape requires conflict. But, I would argue, the pastoral fantasy is ultimately one that seeks to resolve and elide conflict through mourning, moralizing, and calling for a return to "simpler" times.

A notable feature of this fantasy is an omission or denial of the suffering undergone by the native and indigenous people and creatures (see Carol J. Adam's "absent referent"). The call to colonize, enslave, plunder, and ravage was made more palpable by pastoral fantasies: manifest destiny, the European colonialization of the so-called "new world," genocide. And yet the pastoral is also there to serve as a balm to this suffering, again, through mourning. The lamenting of the "raping" of a pure and feminized wilderness, the slick and deft conflation of native-woman-animal-other, and standing above it all, gazing at *his* landscape, is the patriarch-poet-philosopher-king.

And whether or not this engagement – this connection to nature and rural life – is informed by lived experience matters not. 20th century examples of pastoralism's tradition of performing experience that is not actually lived would include Robert Frost – who wasn't really a farmer until late in his life, and The Beach Boys – who weren't really surfers. The politics and political context of these fantasies matter, too. The key problem in these pastoral fantasies isn't the imaginary relationship with nature, but rather the position of aesthetic authority control, the instrumentalization and use of an other-ed "nature" that services an ideology whose goal is to occlude or cover over antagonism.

One of the most urgent features of what we might call ecopoetics – especially if we wish to identify the ways in which the project of ecopoetics is distinct from that of the pastoral – is the way in which its concern is not so much with that of the mournful lament, but rather a call to be more honest about our experiences "out-of-doors," including our own complicity – or "house making" in the conditions that are problematic in our environment. Here we might recall Jonathan Skinner's description of going for a walk and then sitting down and trying to write a poem about the environment – the difficulty of engaging both concrete and sky, the made and the natural. In light of these concerns, I would consider what I will soon describe as a feral poetics as a poetics that fits under the broader umbrella of ecopoetics (whether or not ecopoetics wants it or not!).

But, before I talk more specifically about a feral poetics, I would also like to address the rhetoric of contemporary environmentalism, because it has a lot in common with the pastoral – is, in fact, informed by the pastoral and vice versa – and I think it has, in the US at least, a lot of influence on the way we talk about "nature," including the ways nature is represented in poetry. At its best, the language of the environmental movement calls new communities into being through its gathering of testimonies, through its endeavor to include and record the many voices of those who suffer as a result of the corporate crimes against humanity and nature that occur in service of global capitalism, and in its investigation of the nature of those crimes, seeking to expose and identify the ways in which the project of extracting capital from the environment is sanctioned, allowed, and encouraged by those in power despite its contribution to wide-spread suffering and destruction. It provides a context for participation that is inclusive and wide-reaching. And yet the rhetoric of the environmental movement can also be evangelical, instructive, didactic, pedantic, and scolding. At its least effective, it is a rhetoric that slips into calls for self-sacrifice and austerity, cultivates guilt as its motivating affect, and thus contributes to a culture of alienation and policing that unfortunately reproduces many of the dynamics and power

relationships that it otherwise seeks to critique.

And so we see here the ways in which environmentalism shares an affinity with the work of the pastoral, which is to close the gaps, create a false sense of totality/community, and paper over the antagonisms (also the methodology of fascism, which has had some overlap with environmentalism). Conversely, the feral seeks to keep the antagonism open.

II. **Feral Poetics**

I think of "feral" as descriptive term that is informed by, but is also in tension with, scientific and artistic taxonomies. Also, since dictionary definitions are a deferalizing approach to language, I'll begin by saying what feral is *not*.

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.

FERAL IS:

- A creature or poetics that 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/only 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. Which is to say: the feral is everywhere.
- 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 _____.

III. FERAL CREATURES, FERAL POETICS

I'll end by offering an example of the feral, one that is most dear to my heart, and is most apt for troubling the pastoral. 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.



Shrek literally escaped the pastoral (for a time, at least), but he did not become wild, and he still had to bear the burden of growing a massive fleece, which is itself evidence of the process of domestication. And yet even in the pasture of the modern shepherds' google-earth-mapped and cultivated pastures, there was room to move, sidestep, hide...there was room to live. And so a feral poetics, like Shrek, seeks a way to live outside the conditions of cultivation or confinement.

Examples of the feral are all around us. The presence of feral plants and animals (many of them are also called weeds and pests) is ubiquitous, and yet they are frequently made invisible or flatly problematized by larger narratives of power – narratives of the "natural," of the "invasive." And so paying attention to the feral can – in itself – be an act of intervention, an act of uncovering. The omnipresence of the feral is a testimony, record, artifact, etc. of the human project to shape, cultivate, capture, or make use of fellow lives and natural resources. And here is the good part – the hopeful part – and that is that the feral gives us alternative options for thinking about power

vis-à-vis the environment other than those that dominate the rhetoric of pastoralism and environmentalism, thus making it possible for more of us to live.