

NOTES TOWARDS A FERAL POETICS

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



Although the precise nature of how the ponies came to live on Assateague remains a mystery, a popular legend suggests that the ponies are the descendants of those who 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.

In this 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 can we use this story of feral marronage as a model for community-building and artistic, poetic, and/or pedagogical practice?
- How can we draw upon this allegory to better understand emergent artistic communities--particularly feminist and queer communities--that have challenged literary traditions and other political and social constructs?
- And how might a feral poetics undermine the duplicitous categories of "wild," "tame," and "domestic"?

I enlist a variety of thinkers to help guide this inquiry, including Marguerite Duras, Fanny Howe, Alice Notley, Donna Haraway, Elizabeth Grosz, Harryette Mullen, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and bell hooks.



Finally, I will consider the work of poets whose writing/practice may be called “feral.” These writers are Bhanu Kapil, Claudia Rankine, and Maggie Nelson.



Due to their complex social structure the Assateague horses display a wide range of unique behaviors.



Shrek 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, the Merino sheep had grown a mammoth 60-pound fleece.



What is feral?

Feral – a descriptive term informed but also in tension with scientific and artistic taxonomies.

- a species or poetics that has changed or is different from other species or poetics in ways that may be loosely understood as a transition, deviation, or difference that may be characterized as “controlled” to “uncontrolled” or “modified” to “unmodified.”
 - domesticated -> un-domesticated
 - cultivated -> uncultivated
 - Kept/contained/captive -> un-kept/uncontained/free
 - These changes/transitions occur for various reasons:
 - Neglect
 - Abandonment
 - Accidental loss
 - Natural disaster
 - Release
 - Escape
- A species 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.
- A feral poetics or species may or may not be aware of its ferality.
- A feral species or poetics may or may not be interested in sustainability.

What feral is *not*:

- another word for “wild.”
 - A species or poetics that is neither “wild” or “tame.”However the state of being feral engages these notions.
 - Zoologists generally exclude from the ‘feral’ category animals which 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.

For me, the term “feral” is most useful as a way to describe types of practices, behaviors, engagements, and performances. At this point, I am not as interested in how the term could be used to describe a set of values. That said,

- Species or poetics in a feral state tend to arouse our awareness of boundaries, borders, conventions, common practices, assumptions, rules, and received notions.
- Feral species and poetics often emerge/exist in spaces adjacent to narratives of human oppression: colonialism, imperialism, racism, sexism, militarism.
- Thus, the feral is especially vulnerable to outside systems of management, even when those agents of management profess to admire and value the feral.
 - More often than not, we are troubled by the feral.

An additional note on how I have selected the text I've chosen to classify as enacting 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 are not simply tautological. In the interest of transparency and – I believe – an enactment of feral poetics – I wish to 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. This is because, for me, this marking of a 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 representative list of the way these texts make me feel, and then I've tried to identify why they make me feel that way.

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

- Relief
- Excitement
- Empathy

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

- Radical subjectivity
- Public Displays of Affect (PDA)
- Cross-species or interspecies alliances and/or affiliations
- Liminality
- Disrupted, altered, or new temporalities

Calls to form new communities

- An uncovering of the often overlooked
- An attention to “micro” evidences of gross inequalities or injustices
- Descriptions of wishes, dreams, or fantasies
- Contaminated or monstrous creatures.

Fanny Howe

“What I have been thinking about, lately, is bewilderment as a way of entering the day as much as the work.

Bewilderment as a poetics and a politics.” (5)

“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)

“What I have recently noticed is that there is a field of faith that the faithful inhabit.

If you choose to enter this field after them, you enter questioning and you endlessly seek a way to explain and defend your choice to be there.

When you remain outside the field, you see that it requires no explanation or defense.

You, on the outside, perhaps better than those always inhabiting the field, know that it doesn't matter whether you are on the insides or the outside of the faith-field, because there is no inside or outside anyway under an indiscriminating sky” (10)

Fanny Howe

“Language, as we have it, fails to deal with confusion.” (14)

“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)

“Bewilderment is an enchantment that follows a complete collapse of reference and reconcilability.

It breaks open the lock of dualism (*it's this or that*) and peers out into space (*not this, not that*).” (15)

“You are progressing at one level and becoming more lost on another.” (16)

“A big error comes when you believe that a form, name, or position in which the subject is viewed is the only way that the subject can be viewed. This is called ‘binding’ and it leads directly to painful contradictions and clashes. It leads to war in the larger world.” (20)

“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

“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.” (Duras, 10)

“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)

Trinh T. Minh-ha

“The story never stops beginning or ending. It appears headless and bottomless for it is built on differences. Its (in)finitude subverts every notion of completeness and its form remains a non-totalizable one. The differences is 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 stay inexhaustible within its own limits. Its departures and arrivals. Its quietness.” (2)

Trinh T. Minh-ha

“Anthropology as a Western science of man studies man as *the* human species. He who *knows* how to distinguish the *real* from the *false*, investigates man and woman indifferently as male and female “social animals.”

“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)

Donna Harraway

“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)

“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)

“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)

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In addition to the meaning of the word feral described here, from Latin fera, "a wild beast", the word has a second unrelated meaning, from Latin feralis, "belonging to the dead," "funeral."

While the horse was originally indigenous to North America, the wild ancestor died out at the end of the last Ice Age. In both Australia and the Americas, modern "wild" horses descended from domesticated horses brought by European explorers and settlers that escaped, spread, and thrived.

Advocates for free-roaming horses argued that horses were native to North America and eliminated by paleolithic human beings, and as a native wild animal they should be protected like the [grizzly bear](#) or [bald eagle](#).

First, more about the ponies:



Although the entire Island is owned by the federal government, Assateague is split by a fence at the Maryland/Virginia state line, with a herd of around 150 ponies living on each side of the fence. The herds live on land managed by two different federal agencies with very different management strategies.

Ponies from the Maryland herd, referred to in literature of the [National Park Service](#) as Assateague horses, live within [Assateague Island National Seashore](#). They are generally treated as wild animals, given no more or less assistance than other species on the island, other than to be treated with [contraceptives](#) to prevent overpopulation. Conversely, the Virginia herd, referred to as Chincoteague ponies, lives within the [Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge](#) but is owned by the Chincoteague Volunteer Fire Company. The Virginia ponies are treated to twice yearly veterinary inspections, which prepare them for life among the general equine population if they are sold at auction.

volunteer (crop plants that germinate in subsequent years after a crop has been harvested) and feral (plants derived in full or in part from crop plants that have become fully or partially de-domesticated)



Due to their treatment as wild animals, ponies from the Maryland herd can be aggressive, and there have been reports of them tearing down tents and biting, kicking and knocking down visitors