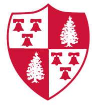
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“I’m not like that!” : Reframing Contemporary Ecopoetic Criticism and De-Metaphorizing the Nonhuman Animal

Alexandra Franke

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Abstract

In this paper, I seek to highlight the benefits and necessity of reframing our critical approach to ecopoetry. In order to do so, I attempt to define "ecopoetry," as well as terms like "nonhuman animal" and "anthropocentrism." Historically, critics have routinely romanticized the nonhuman natural world, rendering it something two-dimensional, like a painting or landscape, rather than an encompassing environment. As a result, critics have often failed to consider the legitimacy of the animals who populate the nonhuman natural world. Instead, these animals are typically romanticized and metaphorized, ultimately furthering anthropocentric hierarchies and distancing us from them. When anthropocentric thought is perpetuated to such an extent, and rigid boundaries are created between humans and other animals, we are ultimately hindering the goals of environmentalism and the fight against the climate crisis. The guiding questions I respond to in this paper are, 1) *How do contemporary American ecopoems demonstrate environmentalism?*, 2) *What insights or advantages can we gain by de-metaphorizing nonhuman animals in our criticism of ecopoetry?*, and 3) *Are we truly being "environmentalist" if we are failing to consider nonhuman animals?* To answer these questions, I use critical animal theorists' works to support or develop my own. I focus primarily on contemporary ecopoetry, referring to poets such as Mary Oliver, Gary Snyder, Rae Armantrout, and Ralph Black, and examining the way they approach environmentalism in their poetry. In order to establish the faults of outdated criticism, and the subsequent need to reframe our approach to ecopoetry, I will also refer to several early to mid nineteenth-century poems, by authors such as Edgar Allen Poe, Walt Whitman, and William Blake. Ultimately, this paper argues that reframing our criticism of contemporary ecopoetry, to include more thoughtful, non-metaphorized analyses of nonhuman animals, is essential in

closing the gap between us and them—something we must do for the greater environmentalist cause.

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

"*I'm not like that!*": Reframing Contemporary Ecopoetic Criticism and De-Metaphorizing the Nonhuman Animal

by

Alexandra Franke

Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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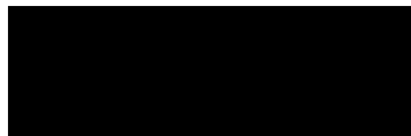

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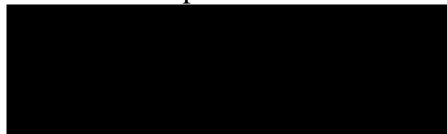

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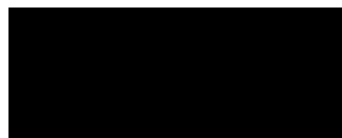

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"*I'M NOT LIKE THAT!*": REFRAMING CONTEMPORARY ECOPOETIC CRITICISM AND DE-METAPHORIZING THE NONHUMAN ANIMAL

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Master of Arts

by

Alexandra Franke

Montclair State University

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Introduction: Criticism of Ecopoetry & the Non-Human Animal

In discussing contemporary ecopoetry, primarily from the last thirty years, one might be inclined to envision idyllic verse with lush imagery: rolling pastures, majestic birds, sublime mountains, and flowery meadows. On the other hand, one might also imagine more politically charged poetry that directly addresses the urgent climate crisis. I would argue that both are accurate descriptors for contemporary ecopoetry, as poets often capture the duality of the human perception of the natural world: simultaneous reverence and fear of potential disaster. In his article "Why Ecopoetry?" John Shoptaw addresses the conventions of ecopoetry, seeking to separate it from "nature" poetry. If we classify "nature" poetry as focused on elements of the nonhuman natural world, we might imagine the stereotypical list of "beautiful," pastoral attributes mentioned earlier. He claims, though, that while "an ecopoem is a kind of nature poem," it ultimately "needs more than the vocabulary of nature" (395) to truly be an ecopoem. What more does it need? Ultimately, Shoptaw believes that "an ecopoem needs to be environmental and it needs to be environmentalist" (395). To be environmental, he believes the poem must simply "be about the nonhuman natural world" (395). If that's the case, then any poem could be environmental if it is centered in the realm of "nature"; however, as Shoptaw argues, not every poem can be considered environmental*ist*. To be environmentalist, in Shoptaw's terms, a poem needs to contain some sense of fear and urgency—an interpretation the critic will note and subsequently turn into climate crisis commentary.

Contemporary ecopoetry is in many ways a far cry from the "nature" poetry of earlier centuries that often used a set of common tropes to express romanticization of the natural world. Because the climate crisis is constantly looming—and, of course, ongoing—contemporary poets

have become less likely to shy away from grim realities.[1] Whether contemporary poets are pastorally reminiscing about a once-clean, untainted planet (like their Romantic predecessors) or including more catastrophic imagery to increase urgency, eco-critics often evoke environmentalist commentary. Our society has long been aware of the commercialized movements to use less plastic ("save the turtles!" and "reduce, reuse, recycle!"), purchase an electric vehicle (less carbon emission!), and waste less water (turn off the sink while brushing your teeth!). All of these concepts have been marketed, giving humans a set of feasible but limited rhetorical and practical tools to help save the planet from destruction. While we need not belittle any of these efforts, my concern lies within an often overlooked contributor to the climate crisis. Unfortunately, the public has been slower to vocalize unrest about animal agriculture and the factory farming industry—these are extraordinarily harmful practices that will be discussed further in this paper.

Discussion of the nonhuman animal has, in recent years, become more prominent in critical and philosophical writing. While most of us would simply refer to such creatures as "animals," the animal critic seeks to remind the reader that humans are, in fact, also animals. Additionally, animal studies seeks to question the act of metaphorizing animals, as it often does more harm than good. Una Chaudhuri discusses the negative impact of using non-human animals as metaphors in literature and performance art:

> … when animals are used by humans to make meaning—be it in art, philosophy, or everyday life—that discursive use of them inevitably shapes and impacts the real lives of the actual animals in question. … Whatever is said or implied by cultural performances about the other animals will inevitably—however circuitously—affect the way those animals are treated by humans out in the real world. (7)

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[1] Note: I will continue to cite the climate "crisis" rather than climate "change," as I feel it better suits the sense of dread in our knowledge of threats against the planet.

While I will not be focusing centrally on Chaudhuri's performance theory, her perspective is essential for understanding the benefits of de-metaphorizing animals in ecopoetic criticism. Because humans use animals in art, theater, and literature, the critical audience is inclined to see them as symbolic—as indicators of the true *human* experience. This, however, is harmful to nonhuman animals which, in turn, hinders environmentalism and our understanding of the climate crisis.

The growth of animal studies scholarship has only accelerated with the popularization of plant-based diets, documentaries detailing cruelty and corruption on factory farms, and any other number of factors stemming from critical questions like: "do we really *need* to eat animals nowadays?" This work has increasingly focused on anthropocentrism's problematic nature. In fact, the animal critic argues that anthropocentrism is a key reason for the neglect of nonhuman animals. Adam Weitzenfeld and Melanie Joy discuss the significance of dismantling our anthropocentric views in the interest of animals. They explain how "Critical Animal Theory (CAT) scholars … reevaluate the significance of dependencies, emotions, and the specificity of animal being and agency" (3). The reason we must do this, according to animal critics, is to "dismantle the structures of speciesism at the politico-economic, sociocultural, and psychosomatic levels of existence" (3). Generally, if we can reframe our perspective of imagined species hierarchies, we can allow for the de-metaphorization of nonhuman animals in our ecopoetic criticism; subsequently, we can focus on animal-related environmental issues.

While I agree with Shoptaw's claim that an ecopoem is both environmental and environmental*ist*, I do not believe that the responsibility of creating this ecopoem lies solely on the poet. I also wish to challenge Shoptaw's apparent definition of "environmentalist," since the term is up for interpretation. For instance, poets often write about nonhuman animals without

explicitly noting animal agriculture or referring to the way our treatment of those animals impacts the environment. That can lead the reader and critic to overlook the animals depicted in ecopoems (or turn them into symbols and metaphors). So, instead of critiquing the poems themselves for failing to make specific statements, the critic must reframe their approach in order to more properly consider nonhuman animals. Stephanie Jenkins (in an essay from "Invited Symposium: Feminists Encountering Animals") states: "Until we recognize the lives of all animate beings as worth protecting, the hierarchical dualisms of human/animal, mind/body, and nature/culture will remain intact" (505). Thus, in this paper, I seek to extend Jenkins's critique by highlighting the necessity of reframing our critical approach to ecopoems—specifically the ones that include depictions of nonhuman animals. Since criticism from past decades and literary movements has so often reduced animals to symbols and metaphors, we must use the contemporary "now" to restructure. Ultimately, reframing our approach to the nonhuman animal in poetry is essential to sharpening our perspective on environmentalism and bringing deeper awareness to threats against the planet.

Anthropocentrism and Subhumanity

In order to discuss metaphorization, we first must be familiar with the problem of anthropocentrism and its related issues. Anthropocentrism (as per Merriam Webster: *n.* - the belief that humans are the "most significant entity of the universe") is, according to the animal critic, the core reason humans neglect nonhuman animals—both in literature and in real life. The belief that humans are socially and morally superior to other animals has been perpetuated throughout human history. Anthropocentrism permeates society, and though there is not a single historical origin point, language and religion have both been major catalysts in cementing anthropocentric thought. Una Chaudhuri notes that a "lack of language" (520) in nonhuman

animal species is a main reason for hierarchical separation (it's *us* and *them*). Because we cannot verbally communicate with other animals using our arbitrary language system, we are more likely to misunderstand the lives of the other animals. This also extends further, past the linguistic realm, into other "exclusively" human attributes. In their aforementioned article, Weitzenfeld and Joy debunk the belief that nonhuman animals do not share the same mental capacity as humans:

> Nonhumans from ants to apes demonstrate that capabilities that were previously - for a relatively short time by only a fraction of the people on Earth - thought to be exclusive to humans are actually shared with others: planning for a future, long-term memory, deception, a sense of fairness, abstract reasoning, tool use, material culture, agriculture, language use, self-recognition, and even a relationship with the dead. (7)

Though it can be difficult for some of us to acknowledge, nonhuman animals are sentient beings who possess many of the same, or at least analogous, mental capabilities to humans. Not having our human definition of "language" is a prominent difference that *we* notice; however, Stephen Clark (as quoted in K.J. Shapiro's "Animal Rights versus humanism: The charge of speciesism"), notes that humans have not necessarily "*discovered* [non-human animals] to lack a language, but rather that we define and redefine what language is by discovering what beasts do not have" (23). Here, Clark highlights that we have adopted a deficit mindset when considering nonhuman animals; what they do *not* have further lowers them in our anthropocentric, hierarchical order.

This is not to say, however, that humans can easily avoid a mode of thinking that is so systemic, cemented over thousands of years of our species' history. What would we have if we did not adhere to anthropocentrism in at least some ways? Our lives might no longer seem relevant, and that is not the goal of eco- or animal studies. Instead, we can avoid unnecessary or excess anthropocentrism—like that, for example, which might influence our criticism of poetry.

Again, I believe that to understand the scope of ecopoetry's impact, we must focus on reframing our analyses of the texts themselves. We need not necessarily completely disregard anthropocentrism in our own lives; instead, we should examine the harmful aspects of anthropocentric thought, and how it ultimately hinders environmentalism.

Shoptaw claims that "human interests cannot be the be all and end all of an ecopoem," citing Wallace Stevens's "Anecdote of the Jar" as evidence (396). Because the speaker of "Anecdote of the Jar" claims that they "placed a jar in Tennessee," the poem itself, in Shoptaw's view, becomes anthropocentric and thus non-environmentalist. In other words, since the human speaker directly places themselves into the poem, the text is no longer about the nonhuman natural world. While Shoptaw's reading of this poem is not necessarily wrong, I seek to reframe it; we *need* to observe our direct impact upon the nonhuman natural world in order to remedy the damage that we have caused. Doing so does not automatically discredit an ecopoem. Further in "Anecdote of the Jar," the speaker notes that "The wilderness rose up to [the jar], / And sprawled around, no longer wild" (Stevens). If we assume that the "wilderness" is "no longer wild" because of the jar's presence, we inevitably note the human as responsible. Though, as Shoptaw claims, placing the jar in the grass might be within the realm of "human interests," the poem is not any less of an ecopoem; however, we can still observe the effects of anthropocentrism on the natural world and our perceptions of it. As the speaker states, "The jar was gray and bare. / It did not give of bird or bush" (Stevens). The jar offers nothing beneficial to the nonhuman landscape, and so the human action of placing the jar seems unnecessary, even detrimental or invasive to the environment. Once we realize this, we are able to further environmentalist thought by recognizing human impact. This poem undoubtedly calls for an interpretation and critique of anthropocentrism. Contrary to what Shoptaw would claim, though, "Anecdote of the Jar" can

remain an ecopoem despite the insertion of human impact upon the natural world; in result, we can simultaneously acknowledge our own systemic, anthropocentric beliefs.

Similarly, we cannot have an ecopoem without the human writer; thus, at some level, all poems are inherently anthropocentric. We must reframe our criticism, then, acknowledging our humanness while thinking critically about what privileges we are granted over nonhuman animals. All of this, of course, is in efforts to maintain awareness that neglecting and metaphorizing nonhuman animals in poetry threatens the goals of environmentalism.

Religion, as constructed by humans, is another factor in anthropocentric thought and hierarchical separation; specifically, as Seán Lysaght explains, "the iconography of medieval Christianity" and "the abstractions of Puritanism and of classicism" (74) have significantly influenced our perception of nonhuman animals. Monotheistic religion is a way of asserting man's significance over nonhuman animals, as doing so has evidently been dictated by God. Further, regarding Stevens's poem, Shoptaw notes a religious allusion and its implications:

> I am sobered by the line: 'It took dominion everywhere.' So God blessed the humans in Eden: 'Have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth' (Genesis 1:28), a blessing which created anthropocentrism. (396)

There is little doubt that anthropocentrism has been perpetuated by religious thought, and it has played its role in nature and ecological poetry up to the present. We can see the religious allusion present in Stevens's poem, and in turn, we can apply our criticism of anthropocentrism to the text. The poem is an apparent critique of human constructed beliefs, and though Shoptaw believes this contributes to the poem's status as an ecopoem, addressing such beliefs does not hinder environmentalist ideology.

Various other systems of belief, aside from just monotheistic religions, also contribute to the distance between humans and other animals. Another poem to consider is "This Poem Is For

Bear" by Gary Snyder. While Stevens's poem contains a more easily recognizable religious allusion, Snyder's poem is not explicitly religious, nor does it contain an obvious reference to any of the major world religions. Snyder starts the poem with a quote: "As for me I am a child of the god of the mountains" (line 1). This quote evidently originates from Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. In that text, Frazer explains the relationship between indigenous-Japanese Ainu people and bears. Frazer highlights the complicated nature of their spiritual relationship:

> The bear can hardly … be described as a sacred animal of the Aino, nor yet as a totem; for they do not call themselves bears, and they kill and eat the animal freely. However, they have a legend of a woman who had a son by a bear; and many of them who dwell in the mountains pride themselves on being descended from a bear. … [I]n the pride of their heart they will say, 'As for me, I am a child of the god of the mountains; I am descended from the divine one who rules in the mountains.' (Frazer)

The idea of having descended from a bear, and subsequently claiming to be "a child of the god of the mountains," certainly appears to lessen the gap between human and animal, as there is a level of connection perceived between the two species. Through Snyder's poem, then, we see species boundaries blur, as the speaker claims, "He was a bear" (line 17) and "this girl married a bear" (line 29). In line 38, the speaker even notes that "Odysseus was a bear." Despite this, however, the allusion to Ainu spirituality in the first line of the poem reminds us of anthropocentrism. Most often, despite occasional reverence for animals, human life is still prioritized over nonhuman animal-life. Though the Ainu people praise bears to some extent, they still demonstrate authority over the animals in their spiritual practices; thus, anthropocentrism is not avoided. The poem, then, is environmentalist in its critique of human-centered practices. This poem will be discussed further under the topic of metaphorization; however, in this context, we can observe the inevitability of anthropocentric thought—even in an ecopoem that is actively environmentalist.

Though we cannot ever fully escape anthropocentrism, having evolved and been conditioned to live in this system, we cannot ignore the dangerous ways our society targets certain groups of other humans. One way we know anthropocentrism, and the notion of human supremacy, is arbitrary is through a history of human-on-human violence. In the same way that humans created the concept of "dominion" over nonhuman animals, they also created the notion of "subhuman" to oppress, persecute, and execute innocents within the same species. The dehumanization of humans throughout history is relevant to this subject, as it conveys the fatal flaws of anthropocentric thinking. Considering that marginalized humans, especially people of color, have been treated as "subhuman" for centuries, it is impossible to ignore the various negative branches formed by anthropocentrism. Though marginalized humans and nonhuman animals are obviously different, the two groups are often closely mirrored in ecopoetry, highlighting frequent oppression and dehumanization. Given that humans understand life in terms of human-relativity, in order to acknowledge the oppression of nonhuman animals, it is necessary for us to be aware of the maltreatment of other human beings.

On the issue of humanity's and other animals' relative status, there has been important recent work that connects animal studies with feminist studies. As Emily Clark states (in an essay from "Invited Symposium: Feminists Encountering Animals"), "feminist scholars understand that what we say about bodies and how we say it matters" (516). She claims that "what we think about (some) animals helps us understand what we think about (some) humans" (517). In other words, our perception of the humans we deem "lower" in hierarchical rank correlates with our perception of nonhuman animals. This is obviously harmful from a feminist standpoint, as well, considering the oppression women face in society. If a human being is not a white male, they are historically more prone to scrutiny, cruelty, and abuse. Clark frames this

feminist issue in a way that includes nonhuman animals. For example, we might consider dairy cows, who are routinely artificially inseminated and separated from their calves—all, of course, so that humans can mass-produce and drink the milk intended for their offspring. While we cannot deny the obvious differences between humans and other animal species, Clark calls for the acknowledgement that societal oppression is ubiquitous, and our treatment of other humans often correlates with our treatment of other animals.

We can look to Lucille Clifton's "the earth is a living thing" to broaden our perspective as the contemporary critic. The poem begins with the image of "a black shambling bear / ruffling its wild back and tossing / mountains into the sea" (lines 1-3). Instantly, we are reminded of the strength of bears; while they cannot literally "[toss] / mountains into the sea," we are aware that they are dangerous and could easily overpower a human being. The speaker continues, noting that the earth itself is akin to a "black hawk circling / the burying ground" (lines 4-5), "a fish black blind in the belly of the water" (line 7), and "a diamond blind in the black belly of coal" (line 8). Finally, the last stanza begins by claiming that the earth

> is a black and living thing
> is a favorite child
> of the universe
> feel her rolling her hand
> in its kinky hair
> feel her brushing it clean (Clifton, lines 9-14)

The "black" imagery of the poem coincides with the planet itself, as the speaker notes a likeness between black people and the natural world, directly comparing black people to other earthly beings. Whether this is rooted in subhumanism is not entirely significant; ultimately, each "black" living thing in the poem is simply doing what is required to survive. Regardless, each becomes "a favorite child / of the universe" (lines 10-11), thus challenging both racist and anthropocentric thought. One cannot separate the human from the nonhuman animal in the poem,

as doing so would devalue one of the two. Clifton captures the connectedness of humans and nonhuman animals through this poem, depicting the intersectionality between animal studies and studies of race, oppression, and dehumanization.

The language and concerns of Audre Lorde's "The Black Unicorn" echoes throughout Clifton's poem. Here, the speaker notes:

> The black unicorn is greedy.
> The black unicorn is impatient.
> The black unicorn was mistaken
> for a shadow or symbol
> and taken
> through a cold country
> where mist painted mockeries
> of my fury. (Lorde, lines 1-8)

The unicorn, being a mythical creature, might not be seriously regarded by humans; however, this poem challenges that notion. Instead of remaining untouchable and fantastical, the unicorn becomes a representation of the way people perceive black people. The speaker de-metaphorizes a made-up creature by claiming that the unicorn has historically been "mistaken / for a shadow or symbol," and that as a result, society has made "mockeries" of the speaker's "fury." The speaker and the unicorn in the poem become one in the same; though, of course, the unicorn is still a mythical being, we can apply this idea of de-metaphorization to *real* animals in poetry to further close the hierarchical gap between humans and nonhuman animals.

Romanticism & The Problem of Metaphorization

Historically, critics have metaphorized nonhuman animals in their analyses of poetry, ultimately allowing for a hierarchical separation of species. We revere the lion as a symbol for pride and honor. We admire the bird as a symbol for freedom, and we romanticize their biological vocality, a tool of communication, as beautiful music. We note the snake as a symbol

for evil and deception. We fear the black cat, as it symbolizes "bad luck." These perceptions are not innate—we, as a species, have learned and perpetuated them through the critique of poetry. These types of critique metaphorize the nonhuman animal and thus prioritize the human experience. This is not to say that we are not allowed to appreciate Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale," Poe's "The Raven,"or other similarly revered works. My goal is not to smear the obvious "greats" themselves—classics are classics for a reason, as they say. However, frequently recycled *analyses* of these classic poems, ones that deem the nonhuman animal a symbol for aspects of human existence, only affirm anthropocentric values. For example, we can look to Douglas Bush's criticism of "Ode to a Nightingale," in which he states that "in Keats's mind the bird has become the disembodied and immortal voice of poetry" (348). Further, Allen Tate notes that in "The Raven," the bird is a "demon" who has "come down from the clouds and [taken] the form of a bird" (225), which subsequently forces the speaker of the poem to confront their own grief—a "demon" in and of itself. Amidst this particular type of criticism, we neglect the fact that nonhuman animals are a significant part of the earth and its ecosystems, and we treat them like a mere feature of some two-dimensional landscape observed by humans.

To fully understand the need to de-metaphorize the nonhuman animal, it, unfortunately, helps to examine the scope of cruelty enacted upon animals in what Chaudhuri terms "the real world." Factory farming, a leading cause of pollution on earth, is not just detrimental to the environment, itself. The conditions in which factory-farmed animals live are deplorable, and the abuse they suffer at the hands of humans is unthinkable. According to Akisha Townsend Eaton, chickens, specifically, are "social creatures who forge deep bonds with their flock in nature" and who are "capable of experiencing … pain, frustration, fear, and malaise" (Eaton 447). Despite this, due to consumer demand in the United States specifically, "birds represent 90% of animals

slaughtered" (Eaten 448). Cows, who grieve when separated from their young (Eaton, P. 450: "It is common for newborn calves to be almost immediately separated from their mothers at birth"), are also highly intelligent animals who "[feel] pain, fear, anxiety, and even worry about the future" (Eaton 449-450). Similar to chickens, cows are often not stunned before slaughter, and some "have endured suffering so great that they are physically unable to walk to slaughter" (Eaton 451). These are only two of the most commonly farmed animals—various other species are abused and used for human profit and/or consumption.

The problem with metaphorization, at least partially, is that under the guise of anthropocentric thought, we lose touch with the suffering and cruelty animals, like those in such industries, are subjected to. Additionally, though, the impact that animal agriculture has on the environment is grave, and by metaphorizing the nonhuman animal, we continue to perpetuate problematic systems of belief that hinder the goals of environmentalism. Gerald Stern appears to connect anthropocentrism, animal cruelty, and environmentalism quite deliberately in his poem "One Animal's Life"—a piece I believe would fit Shoptaw's criteria of an ecopoem. In the first few lines, the speaker ponders their relationship to the nonhuman animal by acknowledging the vast distance between humans and factory farming:

> This is how I saved one animal's life,
> I raised the lid of the stove and lifted the hook
> that delicately held the cheese—I think it was bacon—
> so there could be goodness and justice under there. (Stern, lines 1-4)

The word "justice" here is our first indication that the poem is addressing an ethical dilemma. The speaker satirically touches upon our ethical shortcomings, showing the hypocrisy in humans' actions. The "cheese" and "bacon" are products of the animal agriculture industry, and thus, so long as these foods have been purchased by the speaker, there cannot truly *be* "justice" in the speaker's pan. The poem illustrates that humans often want there to be "justice" without

taking the necessary steps to help achieve it. Further, empathizing with nonhuman animals is regarded as something unconventional, as the speaker "[asks] / Forgiveness of butchers and hunters" (lines 29-30). The notion of asking other *humans* for forgiveness, after showing mercy to animals, displays the grip anthropocentrism has on our society. The poem becomes explicitly environmentalist when the speaker addresses the climate crisis in line 34 (referring to "eating ozone.") We can interpret this as an allusion to the cycle of animal agriculture "eating" away at the ozone layer and subsequently, the human consumption ("eating") of the meat from that industry. Thus, in a nuanced manner, the speaker raises concern about our treatment of nonhuman animals. Toward the end of the poem, the speaker continues to express their discomfort surrounding animal cruelty:

> … Mice
> are small and ferocious. If I killed one it wouldn't be
> with poison or traps. I couldn't just use our weapons
> without some compensation. I'd have to be present—
> if it was a trap—and hear it crash and lift
> the steel myself and look at the small flat nose
> or the small crushed head, I'd have to hold the pallet
> and drop the body into a bag. (Stern, lines 22-29)

One would most likely not want to "have to be present" when killing a kitchen mouse. Often, we use "poison or traps," setting them in cobwebbed corners and waiting for intruding rodents to eventually stumble upon them. In the process of killing vermin (a word that most associate with some level of disgust), we are often distanced from the actual death of the animal. I would venture to say, though, that people might not have the drive to directly kill a mouse with a shovel or baseball bat. This is understandable, considering that most do possess *some* innate level of empathy for other living species. This poem, however, calls humans out for their distanced mindset. The reality is that humans often do not want to "hear [the trap] crash," "lift / the steel [themselves]," or have to "look at the small flat nose / or the small crushed head" of the trapped,

dead animal. Because we set the traps which kill the animals, though, we *do* need to experience these things; ultimately, in terms of the poem, we should pay attention to the uneasy feelings we have about such experiences. Doing so would help remind us that other animals are living beings, too.

On the other hand, the poem is in part a critique of vegans and vegetarians' sense of superiority, as the speaker uses the words "pure and indignant" to describe their attitude toward eating other animals. In the context of ecopoetry, though, does self-righteousness really matter if the planet is benefitting? Does it really matter if the vegan or vegetarian *feels* superior, if they are helping break down species hierarchies? We can ponder these questions when considering anthropocentrism; however, in an environmentalist context, these potential issues might not matter much at all. Regardless, it would be unnecessary, for example, for the contemporary critic to metaphorize the mouse in "One Animal's Life" as the human fear of confronting one's own unethical decisions. Doing so would, in turn, take away from the environmentalist analysis of the poem that notes animal cruelty as a lingering problem and contribution to the climate crisis. Instead, we can acknowledge that the mouse actually, literally, *is* part of the speaker's own environmentalist dilemma, and thus poses the same awareness to the reader.

In attempting to de-metaphorize the nonhuman animal in our critique of ecopoetry, we must be aware of the impact Romantic ideology has had on contemporary ecopoetry, as that era marked a pointed appreciation of the nonhuman natural world. We might consider another classic: Wordsworth's "I Wandered Lonely As A Cloud" features a speaker who, moved by "a crowd, / A host, of golden daffodils" (lines 3-4), "gazed—and gazed—but little thought, / What wealth the show to [them] had brought" (lines 17-18). Until later, that is, when the image of the daffodils "[flashes] upon that inward eye" (line 21) and the speaker revels in the beauty of the

natural world. Similarly, we can look to Keats's "To Autumn" (lines 25-26: "While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day, / And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue"), or to Byron's "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage" (line 1: "There is a pleasure in the pathless woods" / line 5: "I love not Man the less, but Nature more"). A desire to connect to the pastoral—some romanticized, pure version of the nonhuman natural world—permeated the nineteenth century. Such gestures paved the way for future readers, fostering an inclination to praise earth's beauty.

While praise, even glorification, of natural landscapes and nonhuman animals is not inherently *bad*, I believe that critics during this era of poetry *over*-romanticized the nonhuman natural world—so much so, that humans began viewing "nature" as a sort of painting or two-dimensional landscape rather than a tangible, ubiquitous environment. This, of course, is detrimental when considering environmentalism. The criticism that came out of the Romantic era has often been the origin point for widespread analyses of these older "nature" poems. In an article titled "What is Poetry?" from 1855, the author "S. M. C." argues that "beyond and superior to all the forms of speech, and all devices of composition, there is that which the human mind recognizes and loves as poetry" (89). Because of the unique standards that have been placed upon the genre of poetry, society regards it as a form of abstract, impactful art. Again, while poetry might be a creative outlet, the eco-critic must acknowledge the potential harm in associating eco- and "nature" poetry with abstraction and metaphorization.

Often, these metaphors are akin to what we might recognize as stereotypical, high-school English class analyses. In grade school, we are taught to, essentially, metaphorize everything. For example, I read "The Raven" by Edgar Allan Poe in the 8th grade, at age fourteen, and we were taught that the raven is a symbol for the speaker's grief. *Sparknotes*, a summary and analysis website often used by high-school students (most of whom forgot to do last night's

reading), provides a list of "Symbols" for nearly every book on the site. The "Symbols" page for Poe's "The Raven" plainly states: "The titular raven represents the speaker's unending grief over the loss of Lenore" (*Sparknotes*). While this is not necessarily a *wrong* interpretation, as there are various interpretations for every text, I can't help but note how the young reader's perception has, through literary criticism and analysis, been shaped. If we return briefly to Una Chaudhuri's sentiment about the metaphorization of animals, as well as the cruelty in factory farming, we can understand that providing these analyses for young students might affect the way they approach nonhuman animals in their real lives. If we believe the raven is a symbol for death and grief, will we run the other way if we see one in person? Will we kill one before it bestows an omen upon us? Do we really care if it lives or dies?

Since my emphasis in this paper is on literary criticism's approach to ecopoetry, it is necessary to examine an older work of criticism that will support the point I wish to make. Let us take Charles C. Walcutt on Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" as an example. In a 1949 article, Walcutt notes: "When, before 'translating' the bird's song of love, Whitman speaks of the 'meanings which I of all [men] know' … he plainly reveals that an experience similar to the bird's has given him this special knowledge" (278). What stands out immediately to me, the contemporary critic, is Walcutt's mention of a "similar" experience between human and nonhuman. Though he acknowledges that there are similarities between the bird and the human, he does so in a way that reinforces anthropocentrism. Because of the bird's song (which is not meant *for* the human), the human now possesses "special knowledge" based on his own arbitrary interpretation of their encounter. Further, Walcutt muses:

> These indications prepare for the long song of the bird which follows; it is rich in images of human love, mature human love, of a personal and sensual nature:
>
> > Close on its wave soothes the wave behind,

> And again another behind embracing and lapping, every one close, . . .
> O madly the sea pushes upon the land,
> With love, with love [11. 72-73, 77-78].
>
> Now, if these metaphors clearly indicate that the boy's experience is a symbol through which a mature experience of unsatisfied love is presented, the question arises whether the loosing of his poetic utterance is to be thought of as coming from the boy's or the man's experience. (278)

Almost immediately after claiming "similar" experiences between the human and the bird, Walcutt identifies the "images of human love" delivered to the boy through the bird's song. This is problematic not solely because of the word "human." In fact, we could conclude, based on just the first two sentences of this excerpt alone, that Walcutt is identifying man's tendency to perpetuate anthropocentric thought and assume everything in nature is "for" the human. What stops me from making this assumption, however, is the latter half of the excerpt, in which Walcutt plainly refers to Whitman's lines as "these metaphors." The path of analysis taken by Walcutt directly contributes to the metaphorization of the bird and, therefore, the reinforcement of anthropocentric thought.

Published in 1949, this text is obviously dated. Rather than pick apart every line of Walcutt's analysis, I wish to present this older article as a necessary reference point for my argument. My concern is that such readings typify an impoverished conception of nonhuman animals. From the origins of eco- and "nature" poetry, through criticism and interpretation, we have been conditioned to regard the human experience as the only write-worthy experience. We note the apparent beauty of the "natural world" while deeming such beauty a metaphor for human experiences. Doesn't doing so, then, displace the evident charm of nonhuman animals back onto humans themselves? Walcutt noting Whitman's depiction of "human love, mature human love" intentionally distances the human from the bird, and thus re-writes the poem as a statement of the potential beauty of humanity. While this is not necessarily a misreading on

Walcutt's part, these types of analysis can be detrimental if we fail to consider more current, pressing environmental issues.

If we look at a critique from 2018 that features examples from the same Whitman poem, we can see ideology in ecocriticism shifting. Critics have, in recent years, more frequently attempted to de-metaphorize animals in poetry. We see this plainly through an excerpt from Onno Oerlemans's "Sing and Be Heard: Birdsong and the Romantic Lyric":

> Certainly birds have a great deal of relatively obvious symbolic meaning, especially for practitioners of the Romantic lyric: spontaneity, natural beauty, musicality, solitude, ephemerality, and immortality, to name a few. These meanings are so readily available, though, that it's easy to ignore that birdsong is interesting in itself as a natural phenomenon. The significance of birdsong is not only the anthropomorphized symbols we create from it, but in the pattern, beauty, and even meaning the songs themselves might already contain. (2)

Oerlemans's de-metaphorization of the bird in Whitman's poem allows for a new appreciation, and a new perspective, of the poem itself. We do not need to focus solely on what the poem says about *humanity*; rather, we can deepen our appreciation for the nonhuman natural world, in which we all cohabitate, by recognizing its individuality, and by recognizing the bird as the speaker's *literal* inspiration (rather than metaphorical).

It is worth considering Mary Oliver's "Wild Geese" in order to test out this new critical approach. In the poem, the speaker reminds the reader: "You do not have to be good / … You only have to let the soft animal of your body / love what it loves" (lines 1-5). In just these first few lines, the human reader is directly reminded of their animality. Our bodies are animals because *we* are animals. Further in the poem, the speaker states: "Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air, / are heading home again" (lines 12-13). Wait! Before you feel the urge to metaphorize the geese, and proclaim them a symbol for freedom, let us consider this from a different critical perspective. The poem ends like so:

> Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
> the world offers itself to your imagination,
> calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting—
> over and over announcing your place
> in the family of things. (Oliver, lines 14-18)

If we reframe our thoughts as the critic, in the interest of nonhuman animals, we can conclude that the last few lines of "Wild Geese" call for the simultaneous appreciation and understanding of the geese themselves. The poem, itself, even becomes a sort of environmental criticism that we, the critic, can look to and comment on. Granted, we cannot fully escape anthropocentrism, so there is still a human-driven point to be made here; however, we can consider the geese as inspiration for the human while also recognizing the similarity between both species. The speaker ends with the phrase "in the family of things," further indicating our closeness to other animals.

Calling upon the previously mentioned "This Poem Is For Bear" by Gary Snyder, we can apply this reframed method of criticism. The blurring lines between human and other animals—specifically, a bear—in this poem are not necessarily meant to metaphorize the bear itself. The speaker begins the poem by noting: "A bear down under the cliff. / She is eating huckleberries." (lines 2-3). The speaker then notes the habitual practices and behaviors of the bear:

> Soon it will snow, and she
> Or maybe he, will crawl into a hole
> And sleep. You can see
> Huckleberries in bearshit if you
> Look, this time of year (Snyder, lines 5-9)

The sex of the bear is not known by the speaker, and is evidently not important; instead, they simply note that the bear will instinctually hibernate in the winter and eat huckleberries as a source of nutrition. Further in the poem, the lines between human and nonhuman begin to blur. The speaker observes that "A tall man stood in the shadow, took her arm, / Led her to his home.

He was a bear" (lines 16-17). At this moment we, the reader, might be inclined to assume that the bears in the poem are metaphors for humans and their associated behaviors. When the speaker notes that the apparent female character "gave birth to slick dark children / With sharp teeth, and lived in the hollow / Mountain many years" (lines 19-20), the closeness of species is once again highlighted, as human and bear are morphed into one. Metaphorizing the bear here, though, is unnecessary. The "tall man" who "was a bear" and the female who he had "led … to his home" are ambiguously human *and* nonhuman—the common characteristic, of course, is that regardless, they are *animals*. We might note that this human/bear depicts the unfortunate repercussions of the climate crisis, as the speaker presents to us the "Song of the snared bear" (line 24):

> 'Give me my belt.
> 'I am near death.
> 'I came from the mountain caves
> 'At the headwaters,
> 'The small streams there
> 'Are all dried up. (Snyder, lines 25-30)

Perhaps all this is to say that bears are akin to humans in their desire to burrow and maintain a place, or sense, of home (line 37: "Odysseus was a bear" — we know Odysseus's main goal, amidst his extensive travels and toils, was always to return home). Lines 25-30 specifically, then, align with concerns of the climate crisis, as the speaker indicates the "dried up" streams, in which bears would normally find food, as well as the "near death" state of the bears themselves in an increasingly anthropocentric world. When, at the end, the speaker notes, "I think I'll go hunt bears" (line 31), the notion seems almost ridiculous, given the relationship between humans and bears throughout the poem. Why would we want to hunt the bear that is, in so many ways, like us humans? (The bear that, like humans, has "eaten many berries," "caught many fish," and "frightened many people" - lines 30-32). Thus, in evoking this sentiment, the poem comments on

the climate crisis and avoids anthropocentrism. Under this specific critical perspective, the bears are not a symbol for humans, nor vice versa. Instead, the two mirror each other and demonstrate the primal instincts and behaviors of all animals—humans included.

In the same realm, when considering the boundaries between humans and nonhuman animals, we can consider the poem "Dusk" by Rae Armantrout. The poem itself is quite short, but we can still critique it from an eco- perspective:

> spider on the cold expanse
> of glass, three stories high
> rests intently
> and so purely alone.
>
> I'm not like that! (Armantrout)

Here, the speaker distances themselves from the spider on the window. The speaker provides the reader a key detail in the phrase "three stories high" (line 2), as it gives us a sense of spatial awareness. Falling from three stories high could seriously injure, if not kill, a fully-grown human being. So what might happen to a small, fragile spider if it falls the same distance? Certain, explosive death. Readers might be inclined to analyze this poem through an anthropocentric lens. In that vein of analysis, reminiscent of Walcutt and his time, we might consider the spider as a symbol for the human speaker. The speaker notes that they are "not like that!", and the anthropocentrist might explain this declaration as follows: the human recognizes that they are not, in fact, "like" the spider. Instead, the spider's perceived courage (for "[resting so] intently / and so purely alone" at a height which the human knows to be potentially fatal for the spider) becomes a virtue the speaker wishes to emulate. Of course, this analysis is deeply saturated with anthropomorphic thinking. The spider has the ability to walk upon walls, using very small hairs and sheer force, and does not perceive its daily activities as "courageous." Spiders, like other nonhuman beings, simply live their lives and survive, just like we do. The difference, of course,

is that we can converse about these nonhuman animals. We have the means to turn their lives into a symbol for our own feelings and aspirations.

While the concept of metaphorization might not seem harmful, we must remember the trajectory of so many nonhuman animals' lives on this earth. When we distance ourselves from other animals, we place ourselves above them in our own arbitrary, hierarchical order. This then leads to the justification of neglect, cruelty, and abuse. Ultimately, the maltreatment of nonhuman animals, and our frequent inability to literalize them in our analysis of literature, then leads to our inability to truly be environmentalist.

Conclusion: Circling Back to Environmentalism

To return to Shoptaw's criteria for what makes an ecopoem, we know that it should be both "environmental and environmentalist." I concur that to truly be "environmentalist," ecopoetry needs to be approached with the according mentality *of* a modern-day, so-called "environmentalist." In recent years, a heavy cultural focus has been placed upon climate change, as we have witnessed, in disappointment and horror, the melting of arctic glaciers, the rising of sea levels, and the emission of harmful pollutants—thanks to animal agriculture, sources of transportation, factory production, etc.—into the earth's atmosphere. All of these concerns have generally been framed in an anthropocentric manner (i.e., "we must fix the earth so *humans* can survive longer"), and we should ultimately seek to reframe our perspective.

Though some might deem it negligible in the grand scheme of climate disaster, poetry—even art, in general—is a good place to start. Poetry is a means of expression that transcends the conventions of prose. In poetry, the author is encouraged to "show" rather than "tell," which leaves a great deal of room for the reader's interpretation and analysis. Historically, poetry has been considered a means to express all things "beautiful"—to capture life's charm in a way that

traditional prose cannot or does not. Unfortunately, the establishing, original criticisms of poetry relied heavily on the metaphorization of nonhuman animals, which has led us to consider animals as part of a two-dimensional landscape of sorts—one that humans feel they are *looking* at rather than actively participating in.

I argue not that one mustn't enjoy an ecopoem, but that one cannot accurately or effectively critique an ecopoem unless prepared to take a more intersectional environmentalist approach. Additionally, we must acknowledge the detrimental effects of anthropocentrism and our own hand in accelerating the climate crisis. In Ralph Black's "21st Century Lecture," for example, the climate crisis is called to the reader's attention in a way that directly situates the human in a deteriorating environment. In turn, we can use our eco-critical eye to decipher the poem, at least by Shoptaw's terms, as a strong ecopoem:

> The name of the wind is changing.
> The wind, which you know is your breath,
> and spills over flooded deltas, which churns
> through the gleaming thickets of oil refineries,
> fission factories, wind farms, water mills,
> …
> landfills, gun shops, billboards declaring
> the newest-brightest best—You know
> how it fills you, how it lifts away from you
> the words you use to talk back to yourself
> late into the night. (Black, lines 45-55)

The laundry list provided in this excerpt reiterates what we know: the planet is under constant threat of increased levels of carbon dioxide, and is therefore overheating, thanks to pollution from transportation and industrial practices. Directly equating "the wind" with human breath implies the inevitability of human encounter with the climate crisis. Simply through this wind comparison alone, we can conclude that the poem is inherently anthropocentric. There is certainly a level of arrogance in this comparison; it concludes that the very breath of our species

is as powerful as the earth's wind. On the other hand, the speaker possesses a level of self-awareness when they state, "You know / how it fills you." We humans created the "fission factories, wind farms, water mills" and "landfills," and in doing so, we, inevitably, normalized "human" life. We are "filled" by the dread of climate disaster quite simply because we caused it—but whether this is a conscious assertion varies from human to human. Regardless, in Black's poem our breath *is* the wind that "spills over flooded deltas" and "churns / through the gleaming thickets" of industry; therefore, the speaker expresses our direct role in exacerbating the negative effects of those practices. As I've demonstrated here, the way we interpret an eco-poem like "21st Century Lecture" is significant for this reason—understanding our position, and responsibility to environmentalism, in an anthropocentric world. This poem also conveys that we can look to contemporary ecopoetry as its own sort of criticism, so long as it can dismantle anthropocentric thought (and properly consider nonhuman animals).

In connecting environmentalism with the interest of the nonhuman animal, we can look to Marianne Boruch's "It includes the butterfly and the rat, the shit," in which climate crisis is juxtaposed, almost equated, with the problematic human perception of other animals. From the beginning of the poem, the speaker does not clarify what the "it" (in the title and corresponding first line of the poem) is, but we might assume they are referencing the environment or planet earth itself. The poem begins with imagery of the nonhuman natural world (Lines 1-3: "It includes the butterfly and the rat, the shit / drying to chalk, trees / falling at an angle") with no noted presence of the human. In the second stanza, however, the human is introduced:

> … But someone will
> tell you the butterfly's the happy ending
> of every dirge-singing worm, the rat
> a river rat come up from a shimmering depth,
>
> the shit passed purely into scat one can read

> for a source, the creature that shadowed it one
> longish minute. (Boruch, lines 5-11)

The introduction of "someone" in line 5 alerts the reader that the human now plays a direct role in the poem. The speaker seems to directly criticize the human inclination to metaphorize the nonhuman natural world. We become aware, then, of the arbitrary ways in which people romanticize the lives of animals—often likening them to characters rather than actual living beings. Even animal scat becomes something useful to humans—something "one can read / for a source." The speaker challenges the reader by exposing the anthropocentric desire to place our own projections upon nonhuman animals; ultimately, as the speaker asserts in the last two stanzas, the planet then suffers:

> … And trees, of course they
> wanted to fall. *It was their time* or something
>
> equally sonorous. And wind too knows its
> mindless little whirlpool's *not for nothing*, not
> nothing—that pitch and rage stopped. How else
> does the sparrow's neck break. (Boruch, lines 11-16)

By sardonically listing romanticized, anthropocentric perceptions—using words like "happy" (line 6) to describe the butterfly and worm, "shimmering" (line 8) to describe the rivers in which rats dwell, and "purely" (line 9) to indicate the state of animal feces—it becomes evident that we are mere observers of the natural world, rather than equal beings within one single earthly environment. Similarly, the sarcastic tone in the sentence "*It was their time* or something / equally sonorous" connects the nonhuman animal to the environment at large. Trees, perhaps in the act of deforestation, do not wish to fall. They are not sentient like animals, but the speaker of this poem notes a flaw in humans justifying actions that directly, and negatively, impact the environment.

Our approach to contemporary ecopoetry is significant, as are the poems themselves. While, historically, criticism has metaphorized nonhuman animals, we can recognize, from a modern standpoint, that doing so created larger systemic issues. As the contemporary critic, we must be sure to acknowledge nonhuman animals, especially given the climate crisis. We can look to recent ecopoems themselves as a form of criticism, as many comment on the climate crisis in a more explicit way than ever before; however, it is significant that, as the critic, we avoid the inclination to metaphorize the nonhuman animal. If a contemporary ecopoem (being both environmental and environmentalist) contains a nonhuman animal, given our present-day standpoint, we cannot ignore nonhuman animals or blend them into the two-dimensional. Doing so is counterproductive and hinders environmentalist thought. Though viewing animals as symbols is often inherent for the reader of poetry, I believe that in order to dismantle the species hierarchy and further our efforts to help the state of the planet, we must seek to reframe our critical perceptions.

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