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The Dark Pastoral: Material Ecocriticism in the Anthropocene

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The Dark Pastoral: Material Ecocriticism in the Anthropocene

by Heather I. Sullivan



Abstract

The “dark pastoral” unites the Anthropocene’s strangely sunny celebration of its fossil-fueled agriculture and technology generally with the retro-nostalgic, “pastoral” dreams of resplendent greenery, which is all too often complicit in the wealth of global industrial capitalism and colonial resource acquisition dictating specific land uses. With the dark pastoral, I pay particular attention to “anthropocenic” materialities and human and non-human agencies in order to frame, analyze, and even, perhaps, re-shape our ecological thought(s) and actions. The dark pastoral is thus an ecocritical trope adapted to the “new nature” of climate change, the troublingly catastrophe-centered scenarios so popular in the fossil-fueled era of the Anthropocene, and the ongoing centrality of reverently pastoral impulses in environmentalism. By studying together the jarring contrasts of, on the one hand, total catastrophic rubble that may unintentionally reveal naïve visions of cultural power in popular post-apocalyptic texts and films and, on the other hand, the traditional (and poignant) ideals of “nature” as a former (deemed lost) blue-green place of harmony that often purposefully dissemble power structures behind utopian settings, the dark pastoral is well armed with diverse strategies for exposing the dynamics of power and agency in relation to material nature-culture.

Keywords: dark pastoral, material ecocriticism, the Anthropocene



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The Dark Pastoral: Material Ecocriticism in the Anthropocene

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In the Anthropocene, the material environment's energetic processes are shifting into ever more humanly inflected forms. Homo Sapiens is now, according to Nobel Laureate Paul Crutzen, Eugene F. Stoermer, and others, a species with geological-scale impacts arising as much from planned outcomes as from unintended collateral damage (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000; Crutzen 2002; Steffen, Crutzen, and McNeill 2007). Such global scales of power that arise from our actions but which we did not necessarily "will" into being, destabilize our traditional notions of agency on both ends of the spectrum (of having massive power and of having no control over the outcomes). As a result, we face strange new material realities akin to various science-fiction scenarios, and so it is perhaps not surprising that many of our responses are either blindly techno-future optimistic regarding quick solutions within the current paradigm or naively retro-nostalgic about "returning" to pristine, unchanged, "nature." In this essay, I unite the futuristic optimism (darkly shaded by the Anthropocene's fossil-fueled destruction) with the retro-nostalgic, "pastoral" dreams of resplendent greenery, which Ken Hiltner (2011) has demonstrated in *What Else is Pastoral* to be all too often complicit in the wealth of global industrial capitalism and colonial resource acquisition dictating specific land uses. These two flip sides of modernity together inform the "dark pastoral" as a trope for thinking the Anthropocene. Although many texts embody aspects typical to the dark pastoral's attention to "anthropocenic" materialities and human and non-human agencies, I nevertheless propose it here primarily as a means to frame, analyze, and even, perhaps, re-shape our ecological thought(s) and actions. The "dark pastoral" is thus an ecocritical trope adapted to the "new nature" of climate change, the troublingly catastrophe-centered scenarios so popular in the fossil-fueled era of the Anthropocene, and the ongoing centrality of reverently pastoral impulses in environmentalism. By studying together the jarring contrasts of, on the one hand, total catastrophic rubble that

may unintentionally reveal naïve visions of cultural power in popular post-apocalyptic texts and films and, on the other hand, the traditional (and poignant) ideals of “nature” as a former (deemed lost) blue-green place of harmony that often purposefully dissemble power structures behind utopian settings, the dark pastoral is well armed with diverse strategies for exposing the dynamics of power and agency in relation to material nature-culture.

Utilizing Timothy Morton’s “dark ecology,” the dark pastoral also juxtaposes localized biophilic representations such as specific trees weathering the travails of time and “progress” with a more abstract, large-scale attention to the ecological challenges of global climate change, pollution, the plight of refugees, and mass species extinctions. It thereby contains darkly ironic impulses but also a desire to evoke and nurture a close(r) relationship with non-human species and places not dominated by the built environment. Yet combining any kind of pastoral with Morton’s “dark ecology” may seem a quixotic quest since he openly rejects such nostalgic and traditional forms, opting instead for a more resolutely postmodern, “nature-free” yet interconnected “mesh” of dark ecology heavy with productive irony: “I explore the possibility of a new ecological aesthetics: *dark ecology*. Dark ecology puts hesitation, uncertainty, irony, and thoughtfulness back into ecological thinking . . . There is no metaposition from which we can make ecological pronouncements. Ironically, this applies in particular to the sunny, affirmative rhetoric of environmental ideology” (2010, 16–17). Morton’s frame of dark ecology thus sensibly includes the full spectrum of the bodily materiality and non-organic elements in which every living being exists, and it also encompasses the human discursive and cultural elements as well. While his postmodern rejection of idealized nature thus inspires the dark pastoral, his own idealization of a seemingly rational ability (that he terms “the ecological thought”) to abandon all sentimental connections and overcome biophilic nature views—however problematic—misses out on some of ecocriticism’s most powerful potential (Morton 2010). In contrast, the dark pastoral acknowledges practical/rational immersion in the Mortonian mesh but combines it with an inevitable (for many environmentalists) depth of appreciation for its green, blue, desert brown, or even industrial gray shades and its lively non-human occupants whose lives/plights still drive much of environmental negotiations. In this context, the pastoral’s traditional meaning as a form of lyrical poetry or drama highlighting idyllic country life (whether lost or eternal), or even the more general textual focus on the rural rather than the urban as defined by Terry Gifford in *Pastoral* (2010), is here shaded dark and so transformed from literary form into a trope for analysis and a means for describing a world in which there is no place—urban or rural—without traces of anthropogenic industrial particulates. The dark pastoral emerges from a hybridity of “dark” (ironic,

posthuman, postmodern, polluted) and “green” (the sentimental and “artificial natural” of the pastoral that is also biophilic).

When speaking of the “traditional pastoral,” I am referring to the first and second categories of Terry Gifford’s types described in his *Pastoral*; he defines the first in terms of the classical poetry and drama that idealized a nostalgic view of rural life beginning with Theocritus in the third century B.C. and flourishing in the Renaissance and then Romanticism; the second use of the term is any reference in literature to a rural space in opposition to the urban. Gifford’s third type of pastoral, in contrast, functions as any kind of literary critique of the idealization and oversimplification of rural landscapes and people, and rectifies the tendency to overlook the challenges and hard labor inherent to such places (2010, 2);¹ it thus aligns more closely with aspects of the “dark pastoral.” The rich variety of all pastoral forms means that it continues to be a major trope and source of controversy in ecocriticism. There are those who celebrate the pastoral as an alternative to industrial capitalism with nuances still worthy of attention, including Gifford and Lawrence Buell, and those who are more skeptical, such as Greg Garrard, Ursula Heise, Morton, and Dana Phillips (2003), all of whom condemn or reject the pastoral for its idealistic, artificial, and falsely harmonious depictions. Garrard (2012) comments in his chapter on the pastoral in *Ecocriticism* that this trope tends to envision a sense of eternal natural order that is often used insidiously to portray particular social structures as similarly “eternal” and “natural” and therefore to justify the status of the elite; it has also been used for conservative agrarian politics idealizing “Heimat” such as the Nazi ecology (Garrard 2010). Additionally, the idea of eternally cycling yet unchanging nature perpetuates the notion that humanity is “progressing” and on a separate, linear path, a position concomitantly leading to the assumption that our physical environment consists of mere raw material and “resources” that we utilize from an outsider stance. The idealized landscapes of the pastoral may appear isolated from urban sites but they frequently consolidate and legitimize what Buell terms “euphemized land appropriation” (1995, 31). Furthermore, the pastoral landscapes so ably portrayed as “natural” are themselves actually products of quite sophisticated machinery and agricultural practices going as far back as the plow but also moving rapidly into very high tech forms in the past two centuries of the Anthropocene. Andrew McMurray has described this natural/technological contrast with reference to Emerson’s “farmer” and the so-called green revolution of the 1960s that flourished on petroleum-based fertilizer and high-tech agriculture (2012, 549–51). These ecocritics’ skepticism about the pastoral is hence eminently reasonable.

Yet there are a multitude of creative revisions of the pastoral including Gifford’s “post-pastoral;” Garrard’s “radical pastoral;” David Farrier’s “toxic pastoral” (2014)

analyzing recent British comedies in terms of toxic discourse and the wrath of explosive vegetation; my own “dark pastoral,” and the movement in poetry towards a “Necropastoral.” The “Necropastoral” emphasizes the aesthetics of darkness that comes from pollution and a poisoned and decaying world. Joyelle McSweeney of the Poetry Foundation defines the Necropastoral as follows:

The Necropastoral is a political-aesthetic zone in which the fact of mankind’s depredations cannot be separated from an experience of ‘nature’ which is poisoned, mutated, aberrant, spectacular, full of ill effects and affects. The Necropastoral is a non-rational zone, anachronistic, it often looks backwards and does not subscribe to Cartesian coordinates or Enlightenment notions of rationality and linearity, cause and effect. . . . The definitive processes of the Necropastoral are decay, vagueness, interembodiment, fluidity, seepage, inflammation, supersaturation. The Necropastoral is literally subterranean, Hadean, Arcadian in the sense that Death lives there. The Necropastoral is not an ‘alternative’ version of reality but it is a place where the farcical and outrageous horrors of Anthropocenic ‘life’ are made visible as Death. (2014)

Like the Necropastoral, the dark pastoral takes on decay and horror but in ironic combination with the intense green of rural—and urban—environments as active, vibrant activities with diverse agents. The value of the pastoral broadly is not easily dismissed; the proliferation of its forms and its literary qualities offer the environmental humanities manifold tropes for describing and analyzing the current ecological circumstances of nature-culture and the human and non-human alike in the Anthropocene. It can function as an alternative to industrial capitalist models even if its utopian and nostalgic longings for a past golden era are themselves flawed.

The pastoral’s complexity and ongoing relevance that makes it especially valuable in combination with dark ecology is due in part to its doubled vectoring: the pastoral itself has always provided the dichotomous, *Doppelgänger*-hybridity of an alternative universe with beautiful, ostensibly “simple” landscapes of green hills and valleys far away from urban power politics yet highlighting these politics by seemingly ignoring them. Gifford describes the pastoral’s literary complexity as worthy of the postmodern in terms of its “knowing paradoxes.”

The recognition of Arcadia invokes the knowing paradoxes of the classical pastoral—nature and place as a literary construct, the poetic rhetoric of herdsmen, retreat in order to return, the apparent idealization that might reveal

truths, fictions that examine realism, the guise of simplicity that is a vehicle for complexity. (2014, 19)

By dedicating intense attention to the nuanced details of the rural landscapes and non-human species (thereby seemingly avoiding the tainted politics) the pastoral can simultaneously uphold and critique the very power structures that hold it in place. It is this type of rebellion/idealizing (both) that brings Lawrence Buell to describe his book on *The Environmental Imagination* as “itself a kind of pastoral project” (1995, 31). Furthermore, the pastoral can provide an alternative to other kinds of literary forms focusing exclusively on human subjectivities within the built environment (usually presented as if such urban places could maintain physical life without full enmeshment in the water, carbon, nitrogen, and nutrient cycles).

Writing about materiality and literature together in the Anthropocene necessitates tropes such as the dark pastoral with its doubled vectors, paradoxes, and fondness for green spaces that deflect our attention from the cultural and economic centers of power. The darkness is especially poignant with the immersion into the fossil-fueled acceleration of modern “turbo capitalism,” to use Rob Nixon’s term, particularly as a form capable of representing examples of Nixon’s concept of “slow violence” (2011, 8). Nixon states:

By slow violence I mean a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all. Violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and erupting into instant sensational visibility. We need, I believe, to engage a different kind of violence, a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales. In so doing, we also need to engage the representational, narrative, and strategic challenges posed by the relative invisibility of slow violence. (2011, 2)

The traditional pastoral plays out slowness as an ideal, rejecting the velocity of cultural change generally, and in the Anthropocene, of impending or ongoing modernity; it can thereby produce a schizophrenic possibility as either an alternative to dominant power structures, or perversely, quite the contrary, an embodiment of our cultural refusal to bear witness to slow violence. The dark pastoral as a trope can provide, in contrast, a purposeful framing and exposure of slow violence by attending to seemingly slow

changes to landscapes and their dwellers such as Werther's suffering when the nut trees fall after their long lifespan of beauty and shade in Johann Wolfgang Goethe's world-famous 1774 epistolary novel, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, which begins and ends with rural landscapes as the ultimate ideal of simplicity, freedom, and connection to the divine through the intricate beauties of nature at the local stream (1988).² Similarly, the dark pastoral offers a means of addressing the actions of Ilija Trojanow's protagonist, Zeno Hintermeier in his 2011 cli-fi novel, *Melting Ice (Eistau)*, who is overcome by love for the beautiful alpine glaciers melting away in his lifetime due to climate change. He documents the glacier's demise with references to his own stages in life. These comparisons highlight how exceedingly rapid the melting occurs in contrast to the usual glacial pace, leaving finally naught but a rocky moraine and a heartbroken Zeno. These are not ironic views of slow violence eking away at natural forms but rather heart-wrenching literary moments—hence more easily related to the emotionality of the pastoral—capturing lifetimes of growth and change ending in catastrophe. The dark pastoral contains a sentimental attachment to aesthetic forms and memory, to poetics, to tradition, and to community together with a skeptical view from the Anthropocene.

The dark pastoral is meant to be a perspective on the new nature in the Anthropocene, a way of approaching the contradictions and paradoxes of our still beautiful but altered world. It can also be a literary trope of idealized rural landscapes filled with frolicking young lovers (or a lover and his glacier) but that elides the dominant power structures supporting and benefitting from its lush fertility. The dark pastoral is perhaps most vibrantly exemplified by Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy (*Oryx and Crake* 2003, *The Year of the Flood* 2009, *MaddAddam* 2013) with its post-apocalyptic portrayal of a world heated up and radically altered by climate change, devastating pollution, and genetic manipulation that concludes, however, with a reduced and thus flourishing population of a mixed human-post-human (Craker) community with the intelligent "pigoons" all living conjointly in a vastly scaled-down agricultural setting of a renewed "nature." Any kind of green pastoral emerging from such an "apocalypse" of sorts is exemplary of the "dark" pastoral trope, which thus includes quite a large number of recent cli-fi science fiction works.³ We can also read Goethe's infamous epistolary novel, *Werther*, through the lens of the dark pastoral by looking at it as the tale of the "landed" middle-class young man on a quest to find "pure," "simple" nature at the well with the lovely peasant girls fetching water. This quest inevitably fails in the face of stifling aristocratic mores and infuriatingly restrictive middle-class conformity, both of which bring about Werther's impulse for suicide. Goethe's novel maps this internal dilemma with external nature turning from pastoral dreams to frightening and dangerous storms, flooding (diverted rivers), and finally violent death.⁴ Similarly, in

Philip K. Dick's 1968 cold-war dystopia, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, the kipplization of the world occurs with radioactive dust and crumbling suburbs through which a lone, wondrous spider walks until it (she), as representative of astonishing life, meets the androids, who themselves seem more soul-full than the bounty hunters despite their cruelty to insects. Mercer's rocky landscape of heat and barrenness in which stones are constantly thrown at him as he/we struggle(s) up the endless slope while longing for the life of "authentic" animals exemplifies the nostalgia of dark pastoral, but so do the electric sheep. Sheep are, after all, inherently pastoral. The dark pastoral is exemplified by all kinds of contrasts in the Anthropocene: the gritty urban plot with a tree; a community garden in the abandoned lot; the biotic beings of our fellow city-dwellers, the cockroaches; the golden fields of petroleum-fed crops, the dark forest quietly tinged with radioactivity; and the luxurious yet dying coral reefs of the world.

As these examples suggest, the dark pastoral is an offshoot of material ecocriticism's convergence of human and non-human agency that weave together new stories. Agentic capacities of matter, non-human creatures, and active plants take on new life in many recent cli-fi texts basing their action on the all-consuming energies—and agency—of fossil fuels that drive human beings to all kinds of destructive acts as if petroleum puppets. Examples include Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy, Andreas Eschbach's 1999 German science fiction thriller condemning fossil fuels and celebrating solar energy while deploying solar weapons for destruction—*Solarstation*, Trojanow's German novel of climate despair—*Melting Ice*, and Paolo Bacigalupi's "post-oil," posthuman exploration of the "new nature" when plants and algae are weaponized for profit—*The Windup Girl*. These tales of post-peak-oil, battles for new forms of energy, and weaponized plants remind us that our world is not merely shaped by human actions but rather is the engagement of multiple actors, particularly forms of energy whether fuel or plant. Human scientists tap into evolutionary power with genetic manipulations, but they merely set loose the agency of DNA to create all kinds of new disasters beyond our control. And petroleum products rule the world at the moment, fueling our daily lives with gas and electricity and high-tech agriculture-based foodstuffs. They also shape our imaginations that produce both dystopian and idealized nature tales. Atwood's post-apocalyptic setting occurs after a mass genocide of the majority of the human population but ends with an idyllic, pastoral community living in peaceful accord with the intelligent pigoons, bees, and new gardens; Trojanow ends his novel, *Melting Ice*, with climate change running amok and all Zeno can do is dive into the sea to become one with his beloved ice—melted ice, to be sure, but at least in the vicinity of the still vibrant glaciers of the Antarctic—whereas Bacigalupi's darkly futuristic novel, *The Windup Girl*, depicts Emiko, genetically engineered post-human girl who dreams of a space in the North where she

and other “new people” can live free in the fields and forests without being enslaved.⁵ Foods drive the plot and plants mutate almost at whim, while genetically engineered “megadonts” strike out in protest against their abuse. In other words, Bacigalupi turns the human beings all into “windup dolls” of a kind and lets all the non-human and post-human actors take over. In all this free-for-all agentic chaos is one fascinating aspect of the otherwise so troubling Anthropocene: the non-human agencies reveal their power.⁶

The dark pastoral is a bridge between the poles of traumatic environmental awareness of the Anthropocene and the often “biophilic” appreciation of other agencies and the experience of “natural” beauty. One important aspect of the dark pastoral is its demonstration that much of the environmental humanities—and environmentalism more generally—typically reflect deep (albeit often sentimental and nostalgic) appreciation for our co-species and for that green stuff we still call nature, however altered, tainted, and “new” it is in the Anthropocene, and despite Morton’s best efforts. The dark pastoral can function as a tool for grappling analytically and emotionally with our current material and imaginative circumstances in this fossil-fueled epoch. It does not deny but rather utilizes the pastoral’s multifaceted artificiality, its doubled vectoring pointing away from and yet towards power, and its grappling in nuanced ways with the human-green interfaces that are now inevitably colored ever darker with the spread of industrial particulates across every surface of the entire planet Earth. We are in need of a cultural trope capable of the spectacular machinations of modern industrial thinking that denies, in Val Plumwood’s terms, its own “enabling conditions” (2006, 17), and that thus emerges out of simultaneous disavowal and yet reverent acknowledgement of “nature’s” validity in a world that is radically changed; and that is what the dark pastoral engages.

The pastoral’s celebration of harmonious life may be simplistic, and its tendency to reduce the world to a small, local scale may be falsely comforting as Ursula Heise indicates in her discussion of planetary cosmopolitanism (2008, 138–41); nonetheless it can also provide a powerful alternative to current economic models demanding unceasing globalizing growth and expansion with a problematically impractical—if not delusional—vision of “never-ending resources” despite living in a finite world. Gifford, in fact, documents how this literary form encompasses complex, often ironic tensions including the primary oppositions between the (gritty) urban and the (garden-like) rural, between the always already lost “Golden Age” and a messier present time, between myth and history, and between an overtly artificial “utopia” and concrete “realism,” as well as the intentional acknowledgement that the green vision is hyperbolic yet precisely therefore able to provide a social critique through artifice (2011, 15–17). The pastoral shares such characteristics in part with the utopias that very often turn dark and

dystopian when carefully examined, and with the dystopias that end with a utopian gesture after having destroyed the prevailing system. By encompassing this kind of double movement of artifice and denial and thus both upholding and/or critiquing its (often invisible) power structure, the pastoral offers rich ground for navigating the Anthropocene as an era marked most conspicuously by its avid consumption of resources at all costs and as rapidly as possible while selling “pristine” utopian nature as an eternal space for recreation and extraction—all the while erasing a connection between these two aspects. Duplicity, erasure, and devouring are pastoral acts, but so is biophilic appreciation of non-human species.

The pastoral in literary form traditionally does what it seems not to do, that is, it gestures one way while running the other: it presents a(n indirect) view of the urban when writing of green fields and fluffy white sheep; it documents the ecological complexity of small locales coined as if the paragon of simplicity; it portrays the desire for a pure landscape as if this space both were and were not a site of resources merely awaiting extraction; it idealizes green fields and then propagates the conquering of those peoples whose landscapes have alternative functions; in sum, it maps out colonial aggressions and imperialism while seemingly rhyiming about local lakes (Hiltner 2011). Despite the pastoral’s darkly tainted association with the power of the landed aristocracy, colonialism, enslavement, genocide, the naturalization of inhumane practices, and “ecological imperialism”—to use Rob Latham’s term (2007) addressing science fiction—it nevertheless has rich potential for grappling with the Anthropocene’s duplicity, particularly as the *dark* pastoral. For example, Dick’s remaining human characters on the dusty and toxic Earth in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* are overcome with a pastoral sentimentality, longing for a connection to sheep, but also to ostriches, owls, and toads. This post-apocalyptic, post World-War Terminus novel can hardly be considered traditionally “pastoral,” but it is certainly accommodated by the more dystopian and tainted dark pastoral trope: the novel’s idealized, sought-after, and commoditized non-human nature is desired as authentic yet it is artificial to the extent that we are no longer certain, of course, of what is real or “natural.” Indeed, the novel does not abandon its quest for sheep even as it annihilates the ever-more human androids at the end—or, perhaps, allows them to live on in the form of Rick Deckard, the dark pastoral bounty hunter who just might himself be an android, even with his love of sheep (and goats).

The dark pastoral is also a means of celebrating the specifically *literary* contributions to the environmental humanities, which is to say it is an opportunity for imaginative engagement with the materiality of the world in texts and stories—which are themselves material instantiations. Although climate change and other aspects of anthropogenic

impact emerging in the Anthropocene are ecological in nature and thus often considered the purview of science, they are nevertheless cultural problems as well. It is the impact of human culture that we are addressing, after all, and it is a major cultural challenge to respond to the situation, or even just to make these brutally physical aspects visible and “relevant” to our materialistic yet too often materially naïve globalized corporate capitalism (etc.) that typically acts as if it were blind to its fundamental ecological basis (which is often deemed to have no “economic value” for the most part, unless it can be bottled and sold). Literary texts and films can reflect both sides of these issues: the blindness and the critique of our blindness to the ecological mesh. Texts can also, of course, enable new imaginings of human-non-human relations, interactions, or, in Karen Barad’s terms, “intra-actions,” which means that the relations themselves are far more important than the separate categories. Such a perspective is typical to material ecocriticism’s illumination of the agentic capacity shared across all species and matter itself in the continual creation and reformation of the biosphere even as human beings often act as if this world were primarily theirs for the shaping as if a big blue ball of play dough.

Material ecocriticism provides a powerful means of understanding the Anthropocene and its hyperbolized sense of human agency striding across the planet even as we stand astonished by the equally ferocious activities of non-human agents such as climate, weather, water cycles, disease, insects, plants, and shifting species that are all amped up by our activities. The Anthropocene does not actually begin a new era of increased agency generally but rather reveals the power always present at all levels of existence from the atomic to the planetary; we’ve just upped the ante for ourselves and (rather worrisomely) put ourselves forward as the next cyanobacteria-like global species changing the terrain of our own enabling conditions. It is our turn, but we don’t work alone and the impacts are not in our control. Other agencies come along in this frame of heightened energies surrounding our activity: we cultivate and release radioactivity, we bring “invasive species” across boundaries and let them loose, we dig up and release energy sources, all of which have energies of their own that are not contained by our brief interactions with them. We also create stories of power and agency, and these, too, can have a life of their own for better or worse, as popular cinematic narratives, social media, and political discourse repeatedly demonstrate. Thus, to return to the main assertion of this discussion, literary and cinematic texts are vectors for documenting and analyzing these energies whose accelerated release exemplifies the dark pastoral realm of unleashed energies and stories in which we now live.

Material ecocriticism rejects the belief that human beings are the singular “subjects” directing the world of static objects purposely and willfully towards ever-greater

“progress,” or, on the flip side of the coin, towards ever-greater industrial devastation of our planet’s surface as if it were a blank slate. This singular view of agency attributed only to Homo Sapiens (usually with specific class, race, and gender qualities) is, in fact, emblematic of common arrogance towards many of our co-species, without whom we would, in fact, have insufficient oxygen, food, and no means of digesting. Overlooking the impact of other species—bacteria and beyond—and matter skews our ability to perceive the significant engagement of all living things and energetic forces acting in the biosphere and on the cosmic scale more broadly. As Karen Barad’s study of quantum mechanics in *Meeting the Universe Halfway* describes, matter is active across all scales in various forms of energetic processes and change. From electrons to mountains, the world, as we have always known, is in continual flux, and it is the flux or *relations* themselves that are determinative of direction rather than the things/objects related, or *relata* (Barad 2007, 33, 128, 206–8). The energy flows of the physical world including lava, pollen, and light waves, etc., enact autopoiesis throughout time, producing performative traces of emergence that we can see and “read”; for this reason, Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann speak of “storied matter” (2014, 7). This active materiality is a kind of “narrativity” in which human beings are but one kind of agent or “actant” among many. Hence, material ecocriticism and the dark pastoral, tools that engage our paradoxical relationships to power and other agents, provide indispensable points of narrative access for addressing the co-emergence of bodily-discursive engagements with agentic matter including ourselves, our products, and our co-species and their products (and the activities of matter at all levels). This might—idealistically speaking—increase our awareness of our biotic (and now polluted) community in which we live, breathe, and eat.

In sum, the dark pastoral is a possible tool for engaging the Anthropocene as a literary trope. It borrows the powerful sentiments associated with the traditional pastoral but reformulates them in terms of the “new nature” of climate change and the post-apocalyptic scenarios that are ever more popular. Additionally, the dark pastoral is able to encompass the convoluted and double-vector approach to climate problems, pollution, and the ongoing massive species extinction that range from, on the one hand, the technophilic celebration of what we have created and a belief in unlimited human capacity, and, on the other, the delirious delight in declensionist narratives that glorify mass destruction as a new beginning. But it also maintains the capacity to deploy ecocriticism’s and environmentalism’s powerfully sentimental and pragmatic feelings for this world in conjunction with the dark and skeptical irony inherent to Morton’s dark ecology without nature (2007). The dark pastoral is most particularly a part of the Anthropocene, an era of extreme extraction and flagrant burning of fossil fuels combined

with the denial, erasure, and terror of nature-culture exploding as amped up “natural” disasters. Finally, it is also relentlessly and unapologetically a *literary* tactic embracing with exuberance the power of narrative to aide us while navigating the mad labyrinth of our petroleum-fueled myths which are both *materially and discursively active*—storied matter writ large across the entire surface of planet Earth—and stories told adamantly by both beneficiaries and opponents of fossil fuels and industrial capitalism. With the dark pastoral, we have a means of grappling with these material stories, a means that embodies and reveals the convoluted forms of blindness to our ecological necessities combined with a dark but still green appreciation of other species as our co-agents on this planet.

Notes

¹ Cf. also Garrard’s 2012 summary of Gifford’s three types of pastoral.

² Cf. Sullivan 2015.

³ Dan Bloom coined the term “cli-fi” in order to describe the recent proliferation of climate change fiction in science fiction. Cf. Guardian discussion by Rodge Glass on (May 31, 2013): <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/may/31/global-warning-rise-cli-fi> and The New York Times (July 29, 2014): <http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2014/07/29/will-fiction-influence-how-we-react-to-climate-change>.

⁴ See my study of Goethe’s *Werther* in terms of the dark pastoral (Sullivan 2015).

⁵ Cf. Sullivan 2014 on Trojanow and the dark pastoral; and Sullivan 2011 on Bacigalupi’s *The Windup Girl*.

⁶ Cf. Dürbeck, Schaumann, and Sullivan, 2015.

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