

Black Pastorals

What counts as pastoral? And what is meant by ‘Black Pastoral’? When considering these questions, the image of a serene country landscape has painted the genre and its motifs as uniformly positive, glossing over the more discursive perspective of the shepherd. In response to this popular misperception, scholars have rightly defined it as one centered on “herdsman and their lives, rather than the landscape or idealized nature” (Alpers, 1996). It is worth mentioning here Leo Marx’s earlier caveat – that the principal character of a pastoral need not be a shepherd in profession, but one who maintains a “shepherd-like view of life” and participates in a kind of sociocultural disengagement (Jehlen, 1986). The author seeks to recall a return to traditional ways of life as a means of mitigating the alienating effect of rapid social or technological progression (Jehlen, 1986).

Black Pastorals engage in a dialogue between traditional African values, folklore, ancestral customs, and contemporary African American social realities. Doing so interrupts the process of cultural dissolution enforced by enslavement and its aftershocks, reweaving the cultural ties severed through forced assimilation into white society. I would further add to the working literary definition of ‘pastoral’ that the act of rebuilding a systematically disunified community itself acts as a radical form of pastoral social disengagement, meaning that the Black ‘shepherd’ works to elevate their individual humanity, honor, and kinship ties, as well as those of their community, as separate from whiteness. Summarily, the Black Pastoral triangulates society, nature, and Blackness (Dunning, 2021).

Vibrantly riffing on classicizing and pastoralist motifs, authors such as Phyllis Wheatley, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Rita Dove are invaluable for tracing the trajectory of the pastoralist genre

in American literature as one of transformative, radical Blackness. These authors reclaim, refashion, and recolor the genre to empower the cultural agency of Black Americans, reintroducing elements of violence, labor, and derision into the idealized countryside for their personal or societal narratives. For instance, Wheatley's reference to the Roman goddess Flora in *On Imagination*, whose unspeakable Greek name 'Chloris' is famously changed when imported to Rome, can be read as a meditation on Wheatley's own loss of her own West African name and language. Although each author employs pastorals towards various aims in their writings, the collective resonance of their work (as part of an emergent tradition itself) effects an image of somber reverence for the countryside, elevating it as a center of African American cultural memory and production.

The existence of a true 'pastoral' tradition in American literature is contested in modern literary studies and is considered by some scholars as having "alluded to" but "not really laying claim to" the genre as it was realized in Europe (Sayre, 2013). The hesitancy to label American literatures as 'pastoral,' in its European sense, stems in part from the social and ecological differences between the two regions, specifically the absence of a shepherding culture in the United States comparable to that of Classical Mediterranean Europe (Sayre 2013). The lack of a distinctly unified American culture has likewise contributed to this dearth, as scholars have been inclined to absorb the works of white diasporic authors into the traditions of their respective European nations, rather than attempt to fashion them together piecemeal (or grapple with the intersections of race, ethnicity, and culture ubiquitous to American society). Consequently, the contributions of African American authors have often been elided (if not excluded altogether) from this controversial tradition of the 'American Pastoral'. Despite these contentions among scholars, African American authors have continued to employ pastoral motifs in their writings,

with some innovating upon the European manifestation of genre, to explore contemporary areas of social division along urban, rural, agrarian, and industrial lines.

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