

Enslaved Eco-poetics: George Moses Horton's Nature Poems

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Abstract

Scholars, such as Kimberly Ruffin and Katherine Lynes, reconsider American environmental poetry that excludes African American eco-poetic traditions of the antebellum period. According to Ruffin, in order to reconstruct and enhance our sense of eco-poetry, we must reevaluate the black tradition of nature poetry, exemplifying the contemporary approaches to slavery in the USA and elsewhere. Likewise, Lynes's "reclamation eco-poetics" attends to the history of dangers, despite centuries of methodical and organized exploitation, that human groups bring to the black human subjects as well as to non-human nature. Building on this scholarship, I focus on the nature poems of George Moses Horton (1797-1883), the life-long enslaved poet, that highlight the inseparable unity of nature and humans. Horton's poetry deployed nature to prove both the humanity and the intellectuality of the enslaved. My study traces a history of American enslaved eco-poetics that requires us to think of the enslaved human subjects as individuals whose nature poetry hinges on the dangers of subjection and exploitation of chattel slavery. My essay resituates Horton, the black bard of North Carolina, in the nineteenth-century American paradigm, analyzing his poetry and his racial subjugation from an ecocritical perspective.

Keywords: eco-poetics, enslavement, alienation, non-human, Horton

Recent scholars, such as Kimberly Ruffin and Katherine Lynes, among others, have reconsidered the nature and environmental poetry of George Moses Horton (1797-1883), a life-long slave from North Carolina, to theorize African American eco-poetics. Although these scholars built on Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*, they significantly differ from Buell in capturing the African American environmental imagination. On the one hand, Ruffin's environmental imagination explores the ecological relationships between living and nonliving things that resonate with Buell's project (Ruffin 18; Buell 131, 200). However, Ruffin goes beyond the ecocritical prerequisites set by Buell and his proponents – i.e., the authorial intent to protect the environment – to be considered as ecoliterature and broadens the limit of ecocriticism. He, then, studies Horton's nature poems under this new extended theoretical frame and notes Horton's constant struggle with his relationship with nature (37). On the other, Lynes builds on *The Eco-poetry Anthology*, edited by Ann Fisher-Wirth and Laura-Gray Street, and theorizes reclamation eco-poetics in the African American tradition. Lynes proposes the term "reclamation eco-poetics" to rescue nature poems, such as Horton's, and traces the lineage of African American reclamation eco-poetics. In so doing, Lynes "reasserts a relationship or connection between early African American poetic expressions of nature and human environmental concerns and those same



expressions in contemporary poetry” (50). Lyne’s work, similar to Ruffin, helps broaden the scope of ecopoetry that includes poems “not typical of nature poetry” nor “categorized as ... environmental poem[s]” but have a lot to do with both nature and the environment (50).

Although there is a long tradition of nature poetry in the United States, Fisher-Wirth and Street have suggested that there is a much shorter tradition of ecological poetry – a subcategory of what they call “ecopoetics.” Dating this literary movement to the 1960s, and particularly to the 1962 publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, Fisher-Wirth and Street suggest that ecological poetry “engages questions of form most directly, not only poetic form but also a form historically taken for granted – that of the singular, coherent self ... it is often described as experimental” (xxix). In other words, ecological poetry bridges the divide between humans and nature, forcing the reader to confront the ways in which the so-called natural world is continuous with the human world. I contest, along with such scholars as Ruffin and Lynes, among others, two deeply intertwined issues implicated in the periodization of an ecocritical literary movement to the 1960s. Firstly, this periodization problematically leaves the nature poetry written, especially by the enslaved, in the prior literary ages out of the ecocritical matrix. This exclusionary practice is symptomatic of the exclusion of black people (or brown or yellow people as such) from the “human” category. This exclusion facilitates slavery as it categorizes slaves as non-human – “things” to be used, abused, and disposed of. Hence, their relationship with nature does not qualify as a human-nature connection. This process of domination, which Aimé Césaire calls “thingification,” is the sheer abjection of an enslaved black body (42). Secondly, the nature-human divide itself is problematic. If ecopoetry asks the readers to experience the process in which nature is continuous with humans, we see all poetry is ecopoetry – bridging the divide between nature and humans – in some way or other.

My argument here sounds similar to the assertions of Paul Tidwell, who, in “The Blackness of the Whale,” identified the limit of canonical ecocriticism that was founded on “too narrow a definition of nature writing” that “continue[s] to resist or reject” the poetry of non-white poets with “a reactionary and racist defense of an essentialized idea of nature” writing (qtd. in Hicks 202). This line of thinking is fraught with the danger of, as Kathleen Wallace and Karla Armbruster explain, “seriously misrepresenting” the nature writings of the authors “with other ethnic, national, or racial affiliations” (7). It is more so because this vein of ecocriticism considers only the nature writings of affluent white authors, mobilized by their class, gender, and race-based privileges. In doing so, it excludes the authors, who are fixed at a place because of their financial and gendered constraints and/or racial subjugation, for example, enslavement.

Building on this scholarship, in my essay, I am going to suggest a much earlier periodization for ecopoetics broadly and ecological poetry specifically. I will argue that George Moses Horton, an enslaved black poet from North Carolina who lived between 1797 and 1883, engaged in a form of what I will call enslaved ecopoetics. In particular, I will suggest that Horton’s experience of enslavement enabled him to theorize a more fluid relationship

between the human and the natural world. While white poets of his generation – from Ralph Waldo Emerson to Walt Whitman – imagined the natural world as a site of inspiration, I suggest that Horton understood the natural world as continuous with the self. In short, Horton's poetry made manifest an eco-poetic, even ecological, form more than a century before the emergence of twentieth-century ecological poetry.

My study traces a history of enslaved eco-poetics that requires us to think of enslaved African Americans, whose life was fraught with subjection and exploitation. Moreover, this history of eco-poetics asks us to reconsider enslaved ecological poetic expressions that date back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries long before the formal theorization of eco-poetry in the 1960s. My essay resituates this enslaved poet in the nineteenth-century paradigm, analyzing his poetry and his racial subjugation from an ecocritical perspective. In so doing, I add Horton, like Scott Hicks' scholarship, to the pantheon of American nature writing, already comprised of Henry David Thoreau, Rachel Carson, and W.E.B. Du Bois, among others. In many ways, then, this project builds upon recent critical turns in Black Studies, in particular. In her recent monograph, *Fugitive Science*, Britt Rusert traces the emergence of emancipatory black scientific discourses in the nineteenth century. In *Black Prometheus*, Jared Hickman offers a cultural history of black intellectuals who theorized a human relation to the natural world that broke from an Enlightenment tradition that relied exclusively upon reason. Here, I will add to the discourse by suggesting that Horton's poetry realizes an enslaved eco-poetics that enables readers to think differently about the human relation to the natural world.

In the following parts of my essay, first, I will produce a short biography of the enslaved poet, Horton, who composed his poetry to buy his freedom while emphasizing his enslaved ecological relationships with the environment and other people around him. Then, I will explain "enslaved eco-poetics" – the theoretical framework for my essay. Enslaved eco-poetics – poetry written by slaves during the (American) antebellum period – serves as some of the earliest examples of black ecoliterature. In so doing, finally, I will study the eco-poetry of Horton, in which Horton weaves, in terms of ecological terms, his dream of emancipation from his lifelong bondage in chattel slavery. Examining examples of Horton's eco-poetry, I will argue that enslaved eco-poetics is Horton's direct response to the stultifyingly humiliating environment in which he was forced to live and toil.

Horton and Enslaved Eco-poetics

George Moses Horton, the enslaved black bard of North Carolina, was born into slavery to his slaveowner father and enslaved mother in 1797 on a North Carolina tobacco plantation where he spent his whole life working. He secretly taught himself to read with the help of white school materials, such as spelling books, parts of the New Testament, and Wesley's old hymns at a time when the US slavocracy banned reading and writing for the slaves (Horton, "Poetical Works" vii-viii; Sherman 1-5, 16-20). Later, he started composing poems in his mind as his biography reveals: "I composed at the handle of the plough [*sic*], and retained them in my head, (being unable to write,) until an opportunity offered, when I dictated, whilst one of the gentlemen would serve as my emanuensis

[sic]" (Horton, "Poetical Works" xiv). His poetic subjectivity was a mental process of composition complicated by his inability to write with his own hands. He used to visit the nearby University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill for selling farm produce where he attracted the attention of white students with his oratory skills. White students gave him parts of Shakespeare, Milton, Virgil, among other white European poetry, along with the *Columbian Orator* (an anthology of essays and dialogues), geography books, and other school materials from the white education curriculum, based on which he improved his reading and composition skills (Horton, "Poetical Works" xv-xvi; Sherman 8-10). He developed, revised, and recycled the forms, vocabulary, and subject matters, borrowed from these white schoolbooks for his own purposes. At one point, he started selling his acrostic love poems to white students who used to buy them for their fiancées. These white students were his first amanuenses who transcribed his acrostics and made them and their author popular. Later, his more serious poems on the themes of slavery, emancipation, and alienation were transcribed by novelist Caroline Lee Hentz, a professor's wife at Chapel Hill (Sherman 8-12).

Horton became "the first black man to publish a book in the [American] South" when he published the first volume of his poetry, *The Hope of Liberty*, in 1829, still unable to write with his own hand (Hager 69). He published his second volume of poetry, *The Poetical Works of George M. Horton, the Colored Bard of North-Carolina: to which Is Prefixed the Life of the Author, Written by Himself*, in 1845. Lest we overlook the obvious, this is the year when iconic Frederick Douglass published his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, the canonical slave narrative that changed the Abolition movement. This juxtaposition of two, among many, publications by two black authors is the evidence of the advent of a vibrant era of American literary movement, called the American Renaissance, in which black authors contributed profusely despite social, political, and financial drawbacks. Scholars and readers are indebted to the second volume of Horton's poetry as it contains, for the first time, the fragmented life story of the poet that reveals many of the dismaying secrets of his enslaved life. Then, in 1865, just after the American civil war, he published *Naked Genius*, with poems composed during his participation in the war with the hope of emancipation. However, his hope of manumission was not successful. He remained enslaved when he died in 1883.

Horton's volumes contain early samples of black nature poetry that finds its expression through the imageries and subject matters that portray the rural world of the slaveholding south, the elements of nature that continue with human saga, and the hope of a slave within distressing slavocracy. Horton, like any other slave author, did not write only to express his emotions. While his poetry was both a protest and an agony of his lack of societal representation due to his slave status, it was his source of money with which he hoped to buy his freedom. Furthermore, throughout his life, Horton wanted to be known as a "poet" so that he could melt the racial boundary with his intellectuality and creativity. Although he was not successful in gaining his freedom, Horton's poems were anthologized in many volumes alongside the white poets of his time, proving the success of his intellectual enterprise.

Eco-poetics was central to Horton's poetic enterprise that enhanced his appeal for manumission. In order to understand what I mean by eco-poetics and, more specifically, by "enslaved eco-poetics," it will be important, first, to turn to how Fisher-Wirth and Street discuss "eco-poetry." Fisher-Wirth and Street, in the Preface to the *Eco-poetry Anthology*, based on which Lynes proposes her theory of African American reclamation eco-poetics, theorize in exhausting detail three subcategories of eco-poetry: nature poetry, environmental poetry, and ecological poetry (qtd. in Lynes 50; Fisher-Wirth and Street xxviii-xxix.). However, there are some features that overlap all these categories, showing poetic participation at multiple layers. The first and the obvious one is nature as the subject matter either as an aesthetic object or as a backdrop that provides the poet with a repose for contemplation. Second, eco-poetic inspiration is fashioned by British Romanticism and American Transcendentalism. Third, the encounter between the human subject and nature reveals an epiphany – the truth of life (Fisher-Wirth and Street xxviii). Fourth, nature poems "influenced by social and environmental justice movements," question human injustice to nature. Finally, while environmental justice poetry establishes the human as a defender of nature, their third category, eco-poetry, troubles the human-nature divide by engaging questions related to form – poetic and self – most directly (Fisher-Wirth and Street xxix-xxx).

However, I call Horton's eco-poetry "enslaved eco-poetics" because these poems are composed while Horton was in the bondage of chattel slavery. Hence, these poems are the ultimate expression of his enslaved condition – his pool of frustration, drums of inspiration, and grains of hope. He expressed his fear of humiliation in terms of natural elements and events and expressed his vision of manumission through the political acumen of eco-poetics. I suggest that Horton's poems participate in multiple categories – nature, environmental, and, most importantly, ecological poetry. But I also suggest that Horton participated in an "enslaved eco-poetics." In my scholarship, then, enslaved eco-poetics addresses inequality based on race, gender, and class, along with other categories like access to and connection with nature. This enslaved eco-poetics provides aspirations for a reflection on the vulnerable black lives in the antebellum period, along with making arguments for the protection of nature and for the alleviation of the injuries to that nature. In short, Horton blurs the lines between human and non-human, but in doing this, he reveals how both worlds are structured by oppression, exploitation, and expropriation.

Eco-poetics: Enslaved Horton's Hope of Liberty

Joan R. Sherman notes the poetic ingenuity of Horton, leaving aside the influence of "Methodist hymns, the Bible, eighteenth-century British poets of the Graveyard and Romantic schools" on Horton's poetry (37). She acknowledges that Horton, similar to most of the nineteenth-century American poets, relied upon the "American environment" for themes and subject matters (37). Horton's eco-poetry is replete with diction and images of nature. The way he treated his enslaved condition in his nature poems as a poetic expression and a subject matter enlarges our understanding of the interconnection between nature and the enslaved black body. Hence, he seems to suggest a new way of thinking about eco-poetics. The lifelong enslaved poet transforms the authentic knowledge

of the rustic living, illiterate wilderness, the hard toil, and epiphanies of creative joy into poetry with sheer capacity and its countless manifestations. Horton's eco-poetics deploys nature sometimes as a source of inspiration, sometimes as provocations for the struggle for emancipation, and many times as the living record keeper of his devastating existence. Thus, his enslaved eco-poetics is heart-rendering, heart-illuminating, and heart-opening.

Enslaved at birth, Horton's nature poems deployed nature as coinhabiting empathizer and partner in weal and woe to prove both humanity and intellectuality of the enslaved. For example, consider Horton's 1845 poem, "Division of An Estate." It is an ultimate poetic expression of his enslaved condition. The poem concerns the confusion created at the death of the father of the family, a white enslaver. The heirs are dividing the estate, the slaves, along with other property. The slaves, as they are not "things," are in horrific confusion and terribly afraid of separation from each other. It is not a conventional nature poem, but it does concern the relationship between human and non-human animals. Horton writes, "dull emotion roll[s] through the brain / Of apprehending slaves" while the division of estate begins and confusion reigns among all animals (100).

He continues:

The flocks and herds,
In sad confusion, now run to and fro,
And seem to ask, distressed, the reason why
That they are thus prostrated. Howl, ye dogs!
Ye cattle, low! ye sheep, astonish'd, bleat! (100)

These lines, with a tincture of Shakespearean soliloquy, invokes King Lear's lament at the death of Cordelia. It also manifests Horton's reading in classical British literature. However, more importantly, Horton's King Lear lament in the poem reveals the fears of separation from the near ones of the enslaved, but it also reveals that they are not in a better condition than that of the "flocks and herds." They can understand that the "day of separation is at hand," and they struggle to keep up with the "dark suspense in which poor vassals stand" (100). Yet the cattle, sheep, and dogs are likewise distressed, and their distress is more than simply a reflection of the mental state of the enslaved human beings. The sad confusion of division, which reduces human beings to flocks and herds, also distresses flocks and herds of non-human animals. The violence of an enslaving regime, in short, does not merely harm human beings. It is disruptive to an entire, living ecology.

Horton's poem hinges on the notorious scenes of auction block that Saidiya Hartman vivifies in her *Scenes of Subjection*. The "mournful procession of slaves" was brought to the auction block in coffle while the slaves continue singing "little wild hymn of sweet and mournful melody" (Hartman 32). In fact, the slaves were made to sing and pretend happiness so that the seller can attract the buyers. Slaves "shackled like a herd of cattle" are then examined by the potential owners (Hartman 35). In the end, fathers, mothers, children are separated and the fading jingle of their chains, mixed with suppressed sighs and groans, thickens the air. Horton was born into slavery. So, his lack of personal experience of being

in an auction block, although he had seen a lot of these horrible marketplace scenes in his lifetime, is made up with his experience of being divided up like any property or cattle among the sons of his owner-father, who were, in effect, his biological brothers. Horton captures the ultimate abjection and the thingification of the enslaved in this portrayal of antebellum division of property.

Similarly, Horton's 1829 poem, "On Summer" presents us with a sort of eco-poetics that links enslaved human beings to non-human elements and animals, all of whom are expropriated by slavocracy. "On Summer" demonstrates Horton's subtlety in using nature tropes to bring out his eco-poetic – even ecological – perspective. It begins by describing a bright summer day and the poem then creates a catalog of non-human natural objects: the hot summer sun, swarming insects, chirping birds, tired beasts of burden, and whatnot. The poem portrays a pastoral summer day from the rise of the morning sun ("Esteville fire begins to burn") to the approaching evening ("The nighthawks ventures" in "the evening air"). In between, the poet creates an image of "Perspiring Cancer" that "lifts his head" and terrifies others with its "roars terrific" (82). Here, and, in the following instances, Horton's poems are quoted from Sherman unless otherwise stated). Horton complicates the image of "Cancer," astrologically a negative moon sign, by attributing it with the dreadful "roars" and the panopticon surveillance "from on high" – the unmistakable images of slavocracy and its unkindness to the "timid creatures" – the slaves that "strive with awe to fly" for liberty (82).

The speaker continues:

Thou noisy insect, start thy drum;
 Rise lamp-like bugs to light the train;
 And bid sweet Philomela come,
 And sound in front the nightly strain. (82)

Like any conventional nature poem, we see tropes like fireflies that "bid sweet Philomela come," and bees with "sweet exertions" and "delight" filling their honeycombs (82). His invocation of Philomela, the daughter of King Pandion I of Athens, has a long and fairly conventional tradition in English-language poetry. Ovid associated Philomela with song and pain, Samuel Taylor Coleridge published a poem about her, called "The Nightingale," in 1798, and T.S. Eliot referred to her in *The Waste Land* to express pain caused by human betrayal. The allusion to mythical Philomela, who was raped and whose tongue was cut out so that she could not tell of the crime, juxtaposes Horton's pain under slavery because he cannot fully express himself being under enslavement and incessant surveillance of slavocracy.

Yet Horton's fairly conventional nature poetry, which would have easily fit into the Romantic tradition of the period, quickly takes a turn. The immediately following stanza reveals the danger that "lurks beneath the smiling scene" in Horton's life (82). An ox resists the forced labor it must endure. While the farmer "hastens from the heat," the weary plow-horse "droops his head," and the cattle "ruminates beneath the shade," the ox desperately

seeks water (83). The speaker explains:

The burdened ox with dauntless rage,
 Flies heedless to the liquid flood,
 From which he quaffs, devoid of gauge,
 Regardless of his driver's rod. (83)

Here, according to the speaker, one human is denying food, water, and rest to the ox while whipping it with a rod to force it to more labor. This one human is, symbolically, the representative of the human group that brings damage to the enslaved and nature. Horton's poem equates the enslaved with the laboring, enraged ox in the hot sun. The ox, whipped and forced to work in the heat, recalls the image of the enslaved humans toiling in the hot sun. Likewise, the "drivers' rod" recalls the image of an overseer's whip. Thus, in versifying enforced human labor, Horton links the condition of this ox to that of all the enslaved.

We can compare this poem with Horton's 1828 poem, "Slavery," where he laments:

How oft this tantalizing blaze
 Has led me through deception's maze;
 My friend became my foe —
 Then like a plaintive dove I mourn'd,
 To bitter all my sweets were turn'd,
 And tears began to flow. (56)

The "tantalizing blaze" is not the hot sun in "On Summer," but rather the hope for emancipation that has led him "through deception's maze" because of his failed attempts to liberate himself. The deceptive system of slavocracy made the poet mourn like a "plaintive dove" unlike the "dauntless rage" of the ox in "On Summer" (83). Yet the ox in "On Summer" is not merely a metaphor for the enslaved. It is actually enslaved. Moreover, it resists the oppression of the heat and its human driver. Horton's poem, thus, delicately reveals that subjection permeates the human and non-human landscape. The hot sun, the uncaring farmer, the slave driver's rod – all these as a cluster create the frightening image of a slave owner and the oppressive system of slavocracy.

In the next stanza, however, the poem turns back, rather abruptly, to a Keatsean scene of mellow fruitfulness, albeit in summer, where a mother bird is waiting in her nest for her "young to see" (82). Interestingly, this mother bird brings in the image of the slave mothers although the slave mothers knew that their children were auctioned away, never to come back. Thus, on the one hand, Horton portrays a traditional image of nature both as a provider and preserver of human life similar to the Romantic nature poems. On the other, he portrays enforced labor practices where his engagement with nature is supplemented by, in the words of Lynes, "fear, traumatic memory, and rejection" (53). Horton, in the poem, through the strategic deployment of nature, blatantly exposes the antebellum system of slavery and its intricacies.

However, Horton's poetry did not always make manifest this enslaved ecology. Just as often, perhaps even more often, he wrote in a romantic mode typical of his historical

period. Compare “On Summer” to two other poems in his series about the seasons, “On Spring” and “On Winter.” These are quite conventional in setting and expression. Firstly, they are pleasant and celebratory in aesthetic pleasures and emotional solace. Secondly, they are anthropomorphic in execution. In “On Spring,” we get the impression of transient happiness in nature which is, in fact, the reflection of a life in bondage. Horton celebrates:

Hail, thou auspicious vernal dawn!
 Ye birds, proclaim the winter's gone,
 Ye warbling minstrels sing;
 Pour forth your tribute as ye rise,
 And thus salute the fragrant skies
 The pleasing smiles of Spring.

In this poem, a presumably human speaker greets the dawn and the close of winter. The speaker observes birds singing, smells “fragrant skies,” and anthropomorphizes spring as possessing “pleasing smiles.” The events of the poem – dawn, birdsong, thaw – are all interpolated through the affective engagement of a human speaker. It only matters that spring can smile, for instance, to a human viewer who longs to see such a smile.

This poem engages political questions, such as slavery, peripherally. But it only uses the natural world as a metaphor for these problems. He writes:

Exalted month, when thou art gone,
 May Virtue then begin the dawn
 Of an eternal Spring?

This “eternal Spring” – an everlasting period of birdsong and good weather – recalls so many poetic invocations of the day of Jubilee, the moment of emancipation that, as Horton anticipates, will inaugurate a new era for free slaves. But here, as elsewhere, nature functions merely as a means of understanding the feelings of human.

In “On Winter,” the story is much the same. In this poem, Horton offers a vague warning of unfulfillment, a poetic death, a psychic unproductivity, which floats up. He writes:

The voice of music dies;
 Then Winter pours his chilling blast
 From rough inclement skies.

If we consider the transferred epithet here, we see that the “rough, inclement” treatment of slaves gets its tongue under the nature trope of “skies.” Winter, as expressed in canonical literature, is the symbol of rejection, desertion, desertification, and death – symbolic and literal. Horton, who had access to popular schoolbooks, such as the *Columbian Orator*, employs what was a common metaphor during this period. Winter, in this poem, functions as a symbolic prop to express his own emotional status as a slave in bondage, struggling for emancipation. Horton laments his fate:

Lo, all the Southern windows close,
 Whence spicy breezes roll;

The herbage sinks in sad repose,
And Winter sweeps the whole.

In effect, during winter, when “pensive dove shuts up her throat,” “larks forbear to soar,” “cattle all desert the field,” and “humming insects all are still,” Horton presents the selfishness of the slave owners through a vivid image: “Lo, all the Southern windows close.” Horton could easily sense the danger: to both the abolitionist Whites and the slave-owning Whites, Horton is important till he can write poems and till he is in bondage. If his poetic muse stops like the “pensive dove,” all “Southern windows” will shut down and turn a deaf ear to his cry for emancipation. The revelation of this aspect of life is a deep but externalized self-realization through tropes of nature.

Uncommon for this period, Horton does not exclusively use the natural world as a means of reading the human landscape. Rather, he periodically reveals that the landscape functions as a seamless, ecological whole, one marked by scenes of subjection. Thus, Horton’s ecopoetics concedes identical and overlapping perspectives, as acknowledged by Ruffin, of humans and non-humans in a regime of enslavement (40, 41). In other words, Horton’s lived experience in bondage helps him discover a parallel between his predicament as a slave and that of the domesticated “flocks and herds.” Enslaved ecopoetics, thus, claims attention to the world of the enslaved, where the enslaved body is abused by its owner under a hypocritical system. As nature poetry that deals with the truths of life, enslaved ecopoetics reveals the condition and frustration of enslavement – the fear that Horton can be in bondage for the whole life. This meaning determines what it means to write poems while in slavery in the antebellum American landscape.

Conclusion

Horton’s central innovation was that he blurred the line between the human and non-human world, and in blurring this line he revealed the way that subjection permeated the North Carolina landscape in which he labored. In this sense, Horton’s poetry makes manifest an enslaved ecopoetics, and particularly an ecological poetics, that does not entirely depend upon the human-nature divide that characterized most Romantic poetry of this period. I suggest that the poem I discussed did precisely this work. By blurring the line among animals, humans, and other natural entities, Horton reveals at once how all are subjected to enslaving regime. Written by an enslaved poet, who would have well understood the relation between the enslaver’s property and the brutalized human worker, the poem reveals the vulnerability of all to the operation of human oppression.

I suggest here that Horton’s nineteenth-century enslaved ecopoetics extends the significance of this genre by revealing the hypocrisy of slavocracy in heart-rending ways. Such an enslaved ecopoetics invites us to reconfigure how we read American literature and history. In my offering of Horton’s nature poems under the term enslaved ecopoetics, I demonstrate that some of his poems trouble the distinction between human and nature, revealing the ways in which the human and non-human world are subject to various forces of division and control. More than a century before the conventional dating of ecological poetics, writers, such as Horton, made halting steps toward an ecological perspective. Horton’s poems, as

both nature poetry and ecological poetry, take into account human history and American socio-political culture of antebellum more closely. Therefore, rather than dating eco-poetry from the mid-twentieth century, I argue for the origin of enslaved eco-poetry in, at least, the antebellum period.

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