

Of Dogs and Shepherds: Sheepdog Culture and the American Pastoral

Justyna Włodarczyk

University of Warsaw

***Abstract:** This text analyzes American sheepdog culture through the lens of American pastoralism, taking its cue from the obvious connection between pastoralism and shepherds, but also locating elements of the American pastoral – in particular the tension between nature and civilization and ambivalence towards technology – in the development of sheepdog trials in the US, the figure of the American shepherd, the shepherd's attitude to the dog and the training methods used in the process of training a sheepdog.*

***Keywords:** sheepdog, the United States, pastoralism*

[T]he shepherd's dog is the true dog of nature;
the dog that has been bestowed upon us for the extent of his utility
-- Georges Buffon

Even though sheepdogs have been helping shepherds for thousands of years (Miklosi 2009), the increased interest of middle-class, predominantly white, urban and suburban citizens of postindustrial societies in shepherding as a recreational activity is relatively recent; in the context of the US dating back to more or less the 1980s. This article argues that interest in sheepdog training is simultaneously grounded in the changes in human-animal relationships that take place in late modernity (cf. Franklin 1999) and, paradoxically, challenges the very changes that made it possible. To comprehend the appeal of this activity fully, and to account for the paradox which is at its center, I propose to interpret it as an expression of pastoral

dissent within dog culture. This text analyzes American sheepdog culture through the lens of American pastoralism, taking its cue from the obvious connection between pastoralism and shepherds, but also locating elements of the American pastoral – in particular the tension between nature and civilization and ambivalence towards technology – in the development of sheepdog trials in the US, the figure of the American shepherd, the shepherd's attitude to the dog and the training methods used in the process of training a sheepdog.

While dog training still remains significantly underanalyzed from a humanities-based perspective,¹ various approaches have been used to theorize the human-animal bond formed in the process of training. Philosopher Vicki Hearne wrote about the training relationship as based on language and saw training as the process through which both animals (horses and dogs, in her writings) and humans acquire tools that allow them to enter into relationships, which Hearne analyzes primarily as linguistic relationships. Hearne also sees training as a way for domestic animals to achieve happiness through fulfilling their genetic potential for working with humans (Hearne 1986, 1994). In Cary Wolfe's *Zoonotologies*, Paul Patton, writing about horses, recognizes the power dynamic inherent in the training relationship and uses a Foucauldian vocabulary to identify the various technologies of exercising power, arguing that even the most sympathetic training techniques are coercive in that they cause the animal to behave in ways in which it otherwise would not (Patton 2003). Meanwhile, Donna Haraway's use of the term "becoming with" (2003, 2008) marks a shift in the perception of training as a process which changes one side (the animal, as the object of the process of training) into a venture which modifies both parties in ways which are often difficult to foresee. While all of these strategies for analyzing training are useful and could be employed also in an analysis of herding training, this article interprets the phenomenon of the rise of interest in herding trials in the US and the training methods associated with herding through the notion of the American pastoral.

The choice of (American) pastoralism as a lens for exploring contemporary interest in sheepdog training in the US may seem risky, in that pasto-

1 It should be mentioned that research on dog training has recently begun flourishing in the social sciences and life sciences (in particular, ethology), with a lot of empirical studies being carried out by, e.g., Alexandra Horowitz's Dog Cognition Lab at Barnard. Recent articles about herding training from the social sciences include Marschark and Baenninger's study on the use of reinforcement and punishment in herding dog training (2002) and Nathalie Savalois' article on French shepherds' ways of training sheepdogs (2013).

ralism is a concept most often used within the realm of literary theory and this article does not analyze aestheticized representations of sheepdogs in literature but tries to explain a social phenomenon on the basis of the cultural products associated with it: published manuals, popular articles and documentary videos. While the rise of the popularity of stockdog trials and the accompanying changes in the demographics of shepherds could most certainly be analyzed through other lenses – for example, in relation to the broader term of antimodernism – using the American version of pastoralism makes it possible to focus on certain elements of the trend which could not be accounted for otherwise: namely the notion of pastoralism as a voice of political dissent, emphasized by Leo Marx (1986) and Lawrence Buell (1989), the ambivalence of American pastoralism's attitude to technology, discussed by Marx and Buell, but also Myra Jehlen (1986), Jane Tompkins (1993) and others, and Gordon M. Sayre's "oxymoron of American pastoralism," (2013), that is the observation that the very concept used to prove the distinctiveness of American experience is based on a paradigm historically rooted in Europe.

Moreover, it is in the US where the concept of the pastoral transforms from a genre to a mode that can be employed to discuss contemporary reality (Gifford 2014, 17). Terry Gifford also argues that current misunderstandings about the usefulness of pastoralism in contemporary theory are a reflection of the sometimes contradictory attitudes to pastoralism on the two sides of the Atlantic; these range from perceiving pastoralism as an "outmoded model" on the European shore (Greg Garrard quoted in Gifford, 17) to evaluating it as indispensable on the American side. For Leo Marx pastoralism was never a simple idealization of nature: the trope of the machine in the garden was used to signify the tensions related to civilizational progress and technology in the pastoral mode. Even Terry Gifford, who is credited with coining the term "post-pastoral" to refer to writing which does not consciously idealize nature but engages with it in complex ways (Gifford 1999) admits that his term is "an alternative for Marx's 'complex pastoral'" (Gifford 2012, 21). Within the framework of this article, American pastoralism – in Marx's later reading, not as an escapist fantasy but as a vehicle of political dissent – is used as a lens through which it becomes possible to theorize the recent interest in herding among middle class Americans.

Furthermore, applying the lens of pastoralism to reading sheepdog trialing and training, makes it easier to discuss herding livestock by urbanites and suburbanites as a trend, to contextualize it within the broader frame-

work of changing relations to animals and their entanglement with attitudes to the environment. While the rise of popularity of sheepdog trials in the US is part of the wave of human-canine activities that emerge in the late twentieth century in the postindustrial West – an element of what Adrian Franklin describes as the “extraordinary further growth in the range of activities associated with animals” (Franklin 1999, 46) – sheepdog training also differs from many of these other activities in fundamental ways. The competitive canine performance events which have arisen in the late twentieth century are a response to the dog’s presence in the urban, increasingly technologized environment and a reflection of humans’ emotional attachment to companion animals. This qualitative shift – one that is not simply reflected in the number of companion animals, as pet-keeping has been an element of human life for ages, but a shift in the character of the affective relationship to the canine – has become a subject of interest for animal studies scholars (Serpell 1986; Franklin 1999; for a uniquely American historical account see: Grier 2006) who sometimes see this turn to affective relations with animals as a response to the insecurities of the postmodern world and an element of the postmodern blurring of “the categorical boundary between humans and animals so fiercely defended as a tenet of modernity” (Franklin 3). Many contemporary companion animal guardians, aware and respectful of canines’ needs for physical activity and emotional stimulation, choose to devote a significant part of their resources and leisure time to fulfilling these needs.

These popular new sports activities include: agility (an event based on equestrian showjumping), canine disc (dogs leaping to catch plastic discs thrown by handlers) and flyball (dogs racing to retrieve a tennis ball dispensed by a machine, a flyball box). All of these pursuits constitute an alternative outlet for canine prey drive: more socially acceptable than, for example, hunting; easier to carry out in an urban environment and often allied to developments in technology, either because they rely on technological devices (like a ball-launching machine, plastic disc) or because the training methods utilized are open to new scientific findings, employ behavioral science and electronic devices (use of clickers, electronic contact trainers in agility, electronic timing devices). Herding is different in that it reenacts a traditional human-animal activity, one which has not been developed with the goal of satisfying the dog’s needs, but which is based on the concept of the dog’s usefulness to the human. This article explores this specificity of herding as, in fact, opposing some of the contemporary changes in the human-animal bond.

The first part of this article recalls the notion of American pastoralism and suggests its usefulness for an analysis of contemporary sheepdog trialing culture. The second part – using recent articles published in popular media, two sets of interviews with American stockdog trial competitors and rosters of competitors published by the various sanctioning organizations – examines trends in the popularity of herding trials and the social and gender make-up of the trialing community and, on the basis of this data, tries to isolate and identify the pastoral impulse; that is the decision to devote one’s resources and leisure time (and sometimes all of one’s time) to training dogs to herd. The two sets of interviews are *Top Trainers Talk About Starting a Sheepdog*, a book of interviews with top border collie trainers, and *Aussie Herding: Interviews with Top Australian Shepherd Stockdog Trainers*. Interviews with American trainers have been selected from the first book and the second one contains only interviews with Americans. Additionally, to better contextualize the pastoral impulse as a voice of dissent within “dogland” (to use Donna Haraway’s term which creates an alternative to the somewhat condescending “dog fancy”) the article turns to Donald McCaig’s *The Dog Wars* (2007), a non-fiction book on the history of the border collie and of sheepdog trialing in the US.

The last part of the article examines elements of the pastoral worldview in the methods used in the training of herding dogs. This analysis is carried out on the basis of popular herding training manuals published in recent years: Virgil Holland’s *Herding Dogs. Progressive Training* (1994), a handbook for all breeds of herding dogs; Anna M. Guthrie’s *Working with a Stockdog* (2009), a book with information mostly focused on training border collies; Jeanne Joy Hartnagle Taylor’s *Stockdog Savvy* (2002), a manual written by one of the most accomplished Australian Shepherd breeders/trainers; the documentary movie *Away to Me* (2012), which consists of interviews with border collie trainers competing in a top-level trial in Soldier Hollow, Utah; and the two sets of interviews used in the second part of the article. All of these materials were published in the US and are even marketed on the website of the (British) International Sheep Dog Society as presenting “the American way” of herding training.² As such, they seem ideally suited

2 A lot of information on herding training is also contained in Donald McCaig’s dog-related fiction and non-fiction. For the sake of clarity, this article relies only on materials created ostensibly as informational materials; that is materials which do not overtly aim at presenting an aesthetic representation of herding. The only book by McCaig which I choose to use in this article is his *Dog Wars*, a history of the border collie and herding trials in the US and a recapitulation of the incorporation of the breed by the AKC.

to discussing the American herding community in relation to the concept of the American pastoral.

American Pastoralism

The turn to the past, seen as a period of greater harmony between man and nature, which I see as an important element of the herding lifestyle, fits into the broader framework of pastoralism in American culture, first described by Leo Marx in his landmark book *The Machine in the Garden* (1964). While the pastoral as a literary genre originates in antiquity – beginning with *The Idylls* of Theocritus, through Virgil's *Eclogues* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Gifford 1999, 15-17) – with idealized representations of the lives of shepherds tending their flocks, Marx identifies the tension between technological progress and the pastoral ideal as a major, even defining, theme of American literature. For Marx, the role of American literature was to point out the contradiction between the nation's commitment to both the classic pastoral ideal and America's pursuit of "productivity, wealth and power" (Marx 1964, 226).

While Marx was much more interested in the more complex literary pastoralism, he also recognized the presence of a simpler – more "sentimental" – type of pastoralism in American culture, to be discerned, for example, in the longing for a more "natural" environment, in suburban sprawl, in the popularity of Westerns, even in the strategies used for the marketing of beer and cigarettes (Marx 1964, 5-6). In 1964 Marx's reading of sentimental pastoralism was unequivocally critical, largely because he saw the pastoral subject's perception of reality as simplified and one-dimensional and his aversion to civilization and technological progress as irrational. According to Marx's reading of Freud, this turn to nature constituted an escape mechanism from reality (10). The pastoral subject remained blind to the fact that civilizational progress is itself a condition for the emergence of his own pastoral subjectivity.

However, in a later essay "Pastoralism in America" (1986) Marx revised his earlier negative attitude to non-literary pastoralism and located within it the roots of countercultural dissent in America since the 1960s. Focusing on the Berkeley student rebellion of 1964, which took place shortly after the publication of *The Machine in the Garden*, Marx claimed that pastoralism has fuelled a "left-tending ideology not based on a progressive world view" (Marx 1986, 66). In the imagery of the student rebellion, "the machine"

stands in for the bureaucratic system, whose representatives treat students as if they were cogs in a huge mechanical apparatus (64). For Marx pastoralism ceases to be simply a gesture of escapism motivating the white-collar flight to the suburbs, but also becomes the impetus behind a grass-roots rebellion against the capitalist system. Marx notices that “Since the Vietnam era, most of the dissident movements and tendencies of thought in the United States have exhibited a similar shift away from a progressive – and toward a pastoral – worldview” (65-66). Lawrence Buell (1989, 2005) also reiterates Marx’s belief in the pastoral as a mode of political dissent although he is careful to point out the “troubling dichotomy” that pastoralism in America has always been both “counterinstitutional and institutionally sponsored” (Buell 1989, 20).

The purpose of the discussion of the pastoral as a literary and non-literary mode in an article on sheepdog training is to bring out the connection between the origins of the term and the figure of the shepherd and to emphasize the relationship to animals inherent in the pastoral worldview. The etymology of the word pastoral connects it to the Latin *pastor* and in Latin *pastoral* literally means “of shepherds.” Up until the seventeenth century the word pastoral was used to refer to dramas and poems featuring actual shepherds, usually conversing with each other about their lives. David Alpers in his 1996 book *What is Pastoral?* tries to correct the (mis)understanding of pastoralism – as a naïve idealization of nature – among cultural and literary scholars by bringing up its connection to the lives of shepherds. Alpers writes: “we will have a far truer idea of pastoral if we take its representative anecdote to be herdsmen and their lives, rather than idealized nature” (Alpers 1996, 22).

Yet Marx also does not see idealization of nature as the grounding of the pastoral mode. He identifies the American pastoral scene not in Alvan Fisher’s *Pastoral Landscape* (1854), which shows a pastoral figure in repose, gazing at animals grazing in a landscape unchanged by civilization, but in George Innes’s *The Lackawanna Valley* (1855), where a young boy watches a steam locomotive passing through the serene landscape of the valley. The American pastoral scene is thus a scene of reflection upon civilizational progress, available only from the vantage point of pastoral retreat. For Marx the shepherd is an “efficacious mediator between the realm of organized society and the realm of nature” (Marx 1986, 43), a liminal figure, constantly negotiating between two worlds and belonging to neither. The experience of this figure is characterized by his lack of permanence,

constant movement back and forth, which suggests a dialectical mode of perception (44). Finally, the figure of the shepherd is also marked with an unavoidable and irresolvable internal conflict.

In literature, it is also the intrusion of the machine into the bucolic setting, the “idyll interrupted,” which is the classic American pastoral scene. Marx traces this image in the writings of Washington Irving, Hawthorne, Emerson, Twain and others. Yet the same tension and the same motif can be located in this passage from Donald McCaig’s description of a contemporary sheepdog trial:

When the last dog ran and the spectators went home, we all turned our dogs loose and they streaked around, low and fast in the twilight. It was a Saturday night and Oatlands fronts US 15, a busy, two-lane highway. Pip and Gael and I sat outside my tent while daylight leaked out of the world. It was humid, and a zillion fireflies blinked hopeful messages. An unbroken stream of cars passed, but we three animals were invisible to drivers whose vision was reduced to two lanes and the glare in their mirrors. Sometimes car stereos were so loud cars shook and thumped. Dothump, dothump, dothump. Pip sighed and rested his silky head on my knee (McCaig 34-35).

The setting of the Oatlands trial not just resembles but actually restages the classic American pastoral scene: it is remote and rural and yet it is from this vantage point that one can look at technology from a distance sufficient to enable intellectual reflection. The vision of the drivers on the highway is limited, all they see is the surface of the road, while the two dogs and one human – referred to as three animals in a way which blurs the human-animal boundary – can fully enjoy the beauty of the moment, temporarily removed from the rush of the road which they, after all, had to have taken in order to arrive at the location of the trial.

American Sheep, American Shepherds and the Pastoral Impulse

Sheep and sheepdogs reached the American continent from two directions, Europe and Australia, and each wave of new imports can be associated with a different process significant for the shaping of the American nation. Sheep importation from the east was instrumental for achieving economic independence from the Crown. Mark Derr, in the book *A Dog’s History of America* (2004), recalls how in the eighteenth century Britain banned the import of new sheep to the colonies, correctly assuming that the production of wool – and, in result, of clothing and all kinds of textiles – would increase the colonies’ self-sustainability. In effect of the ban, a black market

developed. Smugglers engaged in the risky business of bringing Merino sheep from Spain to the colonies (Derr, 87).

After the Revolutionary War, those governing the nation stressed the need for further increasing the size of the flocks and the number of sheepdogs helping maintain them. Thomas Jefferson is known for importing a group of sheepdogs from Europe to the US in 1789 and for personally overseeing further shipments of sheepdogs to the new republic. Derr quotes an 1813 letter from Jefferson to General Lafayette thanking Lafayette for another shipment of sheepdogs: “the Sheperd dogs mentioned in yours of May 20. arrived safely, have been carefully multiplied, and are spreading in this and the neighboring states where the increase of our sheep is greatly attended to. Of these we have already enough to clothe all our inhabitants, and the Merino race is wonderfully extended, & improved in size” (Jefferson quoted in Derr, 84). If the colonies did not have their own sources of lamb chops and wool, they would have been unable to achieve economic and political independence.

Even though sheep were most certainly important for the American economy at that time, sheep do not necessarily have to be managed with the use of sheepdogs.³ Furthermore, at the time when Jefferson sent for the sheepdogs (1789), he did not yet have a flock of sheep: he bought the first sheep in 1794. Donald McCaig mentions these facts in the opening of his history of sheepdogs and sheepdog trials in the US, suggesting that what pushed Jefferson towards importing sheepdogs from France was not actual need but the appreciation of sheepdogs’ symbolic status as the epitome of canine usefulness (McCaig 10). Jefferson was familiar with Georges Buffon’s assertion that the sheepdog was “the true dog of nature ... the one that must be regarded as the root and model of the entire species,” as referenced in the epigraph to this article. Jefferson also praised sheepdogs for “their sagacity” which “is almost human and qualifies them to be taught any thing you please” (letter to James Madison, dated July 18 1810).

Jefferson’s decision to import sheepdogs can thus be read as the original pastoral impulse and Jefferson could be called the founding father of sheepdog culture. For him, and for the countless Americans later, the decision to become involved in the world of sheepdogs did not stem from the actual

3 Ethologist Raymond Coppinger notices that in many areas of the world where large flocks of sheep are present, sheepdogs are not used. In fact, he even writes that “the work that goes into the training and use of a border collie is more trouble than it is worth for most farmers” (Coppinger 2001, 189).

need for a dog's services, but from the appeal of the sheepdog as a complex symbol – almost as paradoxical as American pastoralism itself – for it is at the same time the epitome of simplicity and naturalness and also something supremely artificial, as the result of generations of human-directed specialized breeding selection geared towards enhancing herding ability; a creature that embodies the tension between nature and civilization. It is at once “the true dog of nature” and also, as contemporary ethologist Raymond Coppinger jokingly admits, the dog with “the most delightfully bizarre behavioral conformation” (Coppinger 190); a predator whose hunting instinct has been modified to the extent that it cannot and will not kill. Interestingly, Jefferson himself is often read through the lens of pastoralism (Marx 1986, 49-52) and has recently begun to be re-read as espousing a pastoral worldview in the complex sense, that is as aware of the tension between the urban and the rural, between tradition and self-improvement, and not simply as promoting the idea of an agrarian Eden (Helo 2014). His decisions to import sheepdogs and, later, Merino sheep can also be viewed from this perspective.

In response to the increased demand for meat and textiles associated with the California Gold Rush, sheep and sheepdogs reached the Western US in the mid nineteenth century from the opposite direction: Australia. These sheep later spread eastward, replacing the local Navajo-Churro breed raised by the Navajo and Pueblo tribes and descending from the sheep brought by the early conquistadores (Haraway 2008, 98-100). The new sheep were marketed as “improved” in terms of their meat and wool production. Ironically, as Haraway writes, they turned out to be less suited for the conditions of the American West and fared much worse than the Navajo-Churro sheep (99). Along with the sheep, came the sheepdogs. As Haraway writes in *When Species Meet*, “the herding dogs accompanying the immigrant sheep from both the U.S. East Coast and Australian were mainly of the old working collie or shepherd types. They were strong, multipurpose dogs with a ‘loose eye’ and upstanding working posture – rather than with a sheep trial-selected border collie hard eye and crouch” (101-102). Similarly, the dogs used in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries on the East Coast were also “of the old type.” Jefferson's sheepdogs were ancestors of present day briards, while drawings and paintings – including, for example, Alvan Fisher's *Pastoral Landscape* – reveal scruffy looking and upright working medium-sized dogs.

This distinction between the two basic types of sheepdogs is significant in the context of the current wave of interest in sheepdog trials in that while sheepdog trials are open to all herding dogs, they are absolutely dominated by the “new type” dogs: border collies that work in a crouching position and use their intense stare or “eye” to control livestock. While “farm collies” were present in the US already in the 1850s, and some immigrant Scotsmen brought collies with them in the early twentieth century, the pedigrees of today’s trial winners inevitably go back to British stock imported at much later dates, mostly since the 1960s (McCaig15-19).⁴

Even though sheep have now lost their crucial importance in the US economy and their numbers have fallen from 56 million in 1945 to 7 million in 2009 (Castaing-Taylor 2009), shepherding as a profession has not completely died out. However, contemporary shepherders seem to exist in two parallel universes. The ones who herd for a living are often representatives of minority groups; most now hail from Chile and Peru, the two South American countries in which sheep raising is still a significant branch of the economy, and continue to constitute something of an underclass (Ruff 2005; Thursby, 163-180). Few North Americans are willing to take on the low-paid, labor-intensive and lonely job. In fact, the bringing in of shepherders from outside the US is so widespread that there is a special provision in the H-2A visa program for temporary agricultural workers exempting shepherders from the requirement to return to their home country after one year. They can remain in the US up to three years (Wilson 2013). According to statistics of the Department of Labor there were 3,517 applications for H-2A visas for shepherders in 2012 (Wilson 2013).

In addition to the ever smaller pool of herders by occupation, in the late twentieth century there has emerged an increasing number of herders by choice: hobby farmers and sheepdog owners. While competitive sheepherding is most certainly not a mainstream sport, its popularity is clearly increasing. Even though the first sheepdog trial took place in the US already in 1880, in celebration of Philadelphia’s centennial, it was an isolated even

4 It should be added that a level of animosity can be discerned between trainers trialing with border collies in USBCHA trials and those trainers who choose to work with loose-eyed breeds. While I do not delve into this conflict in detail, it can be summed up as concerned with the different breeds’ usefulness in working various types of stock and with the “naturalness” of working different types of dogs. Handlers of Australian Shepherds argue that their breed is “natural” to the US (in that it is a breed originating in American), while border collie handlers claim that their breed’s greater usefulness makes it a more “natural” choice for farmers.

and the coming into being of a trialing circuit is quite recent.⁵ Bodies governing the organization of formal herding trials began to form in the 1980s and the number of trials has increased over this thirty-year period to the extent where it is safe to assume – on the basis of calendars of events published by the major organizations – that at least one trial is held in the US on any given weekend.⁶

Some of the most famous events gather crowds of roughly 20,000 spectators. The number of competitors in the finals events can be seen as indicative of the size of the entire population of hobby herders. For example, in 2014 the sheepdog finals of the United States Border Collie Handlers' Association were attended by over 240 competitors. In order to qualify for a finals level event, handlers and dog must regularly attend smaller trials, collect finals points and beat other competitors. The size of the total pool of competitors is at least tenfold that of the finalists. The Australian Shepherd Club of America estimates the number of competitors in the trials sanctioned by ASCA for several thousand dogs a year. Not all dog and handler teams, it must be added, ever achieve the level of training which makes it possible for them to enter a trial. One thing is clear, the number of people who herd sheep as a recreational activity is increasing, while simultaneously the number of those who herd for a living is decreasing.

For many of the competitors the catalyst for interest in sheep was not the need to manage their sheep but their fascination with herding dogs. As was the case with Thomas Jefferson, the dogs came before the sheep and yet it is the dogs' usefulness which constitutes their appeal. The voiceover in the movie *Away To Me* (2012), documenting the lives of competitors in a top level event held in Soldier Hollow, Utah, opens with what is given as the typical narrative of sheepdog enthusiasts: "First, you get a dog. Then, you get a couple of acres and a few sheep. Then, you find yourself living on a big farm" (*Away To Me*). This narrative framework is presented as the master paradigm for many sheepdog trial competitors. Faansie Basson, one of

5 On the website *Herding on the Web* Linda Rorem reprints the catalogue and news coverage of this first trial in an article titled "Herding Trial in Philadelphia in 1880" www.herdingontheweb.com (accessed Nov. 30 2014).

6 The most important organizations which sanction herding trials (sometimes called stockdog trials) include: the USBCHA (United States Border Collie Handlers' Association), founded in 1979; the AHBA (American Herding Breed Association), founded in 1986; ASCA (Australian Shepherd Club of America), whose first trial took place in 1974; AKC (American Kennel Club), whose herding program took off in 1989. Of these, the USBCHA trials, while remaining open to all breeds, are geared towards the border collie and are the most competitive.

the competitors in the Soldier Hollow Classic, says in the abovementioned movie: “Most people I know got the sheep because they had the dogs” (*Away to Me*). Many popular press articles covering sheepdog events in the US also pick up on the handlers’ fascination with herding as an acquired – rather than inherited – taste. A report on the 2010 USBCHA championships published in a local Utah newspaper, *Deseret News* reads:

Local organizer Donald McCaig said the sport was “all male, all-Western, all-tobacco chewers” when he started decades ago; now, the handlers include people like 56-year-old [Rose] Anderson, who lives in the upper peninsula of Michigan and started competing nine years ago because she happened to fall in love with it. “I just like working my dogs. I got sheep because I like working my dogs, and I just love it,” Anderson said (*Deseret News* 2010).

The changes are obvious: gender and geographical location stand out. Interestingly, in Britain trialing remains a male-dominated sport, in the US the gender distribution on the rosters of sheepdog trial competitors is about equal.

Most of the American instructors speaking in the two books of interviews mentioned previously, also did not grow up herding sheep with dogs: in fact, the only American who did (Tom Wilson) was born in Scotland and emigrated to the US at a later age. Anna M. Guthrie, author of *Working with a Stockdog*, who herself supports her herding habit with a job as a teacher of academic writing, acknowledges this commonplace course of events in the introduction section of her book, where she promises that, “[t]his book will end up a useful tool for those ‘newbies’ who somehow end up with a border collie, decide to give it a go with working stock (because after all, that is what it was bred for), and become addicted in varying degrees to these amazing dogs and the work they are capable of” (Guthrie 2). These are the people who can be labeled truly pastoral figures; people who literally choose to live the life of Marx’s shepherd, retreating from the hustle and bustle of urban life but often returning.

In the interviews there is a lot of talk about hours spent on the road, driving for herding lessons. McCaig writes: “Bill Berhow would put his bitch Scarlet on the back of his motorcycle and drive eight hours to Florida to Bill Dillard’s, where they’d work dogs until Sunday night” (22). Some of the competitors retain the constant mobility, the rhythm of retreat-return which Marx discusses, while others decide to settle in the country. Yet even for those the retreat is not permanent as the trialing lifestyle requires constant

mobility, endless motion. The instructional book by the late Bob Vest is aptly titled *The Traveling Herding Teacher* (2014), reflecting Vest's lifestyle in the later part of his life.

Sheepdog Trialing as Pastoral Dissent

As Guthrie's introductory remarks suggest, many of these new herding "addicts" are already immersed in the dog world, their turn to sheepherding results from a pastoral impulse: understood not as timeless harmony with nature, but as reflection on the tension between nature and technology. Marx acknowledges pastoralism as a voice of political dissent not based on a progressive world view. If sheepdog trialing is to be viewed through this framework, it remains to be proved how herding sheep can be seen as dissent and as not based on a progressive world view. In the world of increased individuation, the shaping of one's "life project," to use terminology introduced by Giddens (1991) becomes an ever more complex venture, turning into a "life politics." While the sharing of one's life with a non-human other is already a significant "life project" decision, the myriad possible activities one can engage in together with one's dog take on different sets of meanings, transparent only to those who partake in these communities.

Within "dogland," herding enthusiasts are seen as opposed to mainstream practices in the world of canine breeding: that is breeding selection geared towards appearance. Donald McCaig's *Dog Wars*, is not just a history of the border collie in the US; it is also, as the title suggests, a summary of the conflict over the status of the border collie: a conflict between those whose main desire was to preserve the border collie as a working sheepdog and those others whose wish was to change the collie into a pretty show dog, therefore altering its original purpose. McCaig, speaking on behalf of the community of sheepdog trial competitors and using the emphatic plural "we," recounts the story of the American Kennel Club's – in the end, successful – attempts at registering the border collie as a breed, against the wishes of the sheepdog community: "We feared that one day the AKC would try to 'recognize' the Border Collie, and keeping our dog out of their clutches was the (...) reason for existence" (McCaig 31).

The background of this conflict dates back to the nineteenth century when the establishing of canine pedigree registries changed the way dogs were bred. In accordance with the predominant impulse of the late imperial period, that is the impulse for categorizing and classifying – present

for example in continental and American eugenicist discourse preoccupied with establishing fine distinctions between racial units – the second half of the nineteenth century is the period of the development of contemporary canine breeds. This is not to say that different types of dogs did not exist earlier, but that written standards came into existence in the second half of the nineteenth century along with the advent of dog shows (Ritvo 1987). The predominant trend in dog breeding moves from selecting dogs on the basis of their working abilities to basing breeding programs on the quest to produce a “specimen,” whose appearance perfectly embodies the written breed standard.

This dominant trend is seen by its critics as leading to degeneracy and degradation rather than improvement. As Harriet Ritvo documents in her 1987 book *The Animal Estate*, selection of breeding stock on the basis of conformation, that is certain sometimes arbitrarily chosen phenotypical features, has led to the existence of dogs who are not only unable to carry out the tasks listed by their breed names but also who cannot live out healthy lives and reproduce without human assistance. British bulldogs are a case in point here: selection geared towards short legs, a short muzzle and a big head has resulted in the existence of animals who can only give birth through caesarian section and who suffer from numerous illnesses associated with their physiognomy: problems with breathing, heart conditions, allergies (Ritvo 1987, 108-111). Meanwhile, working sheepdogs, whose appearance is anything but uniform and who are selected for breeding on the basis of their usefulness, are widely known as long-lived, healthy and intelligent. The refusal of British farmers, the creators of the working collie, to participate in the new “unnatural” trend is perceived by contemporary American sheepdog trial competitors as an expression common sense, which ultimately benefited the dogs they loved.

The American sheepdog trialing community is thus unanimously opposed, almost by definition, to the current mainstream trend in canine breeding. Complaints about how breeds have changed and admonitions about how important it is to maintain the sheepdog as it used to are routine in many of the written materials. For example, Anna M. Guthrie writes: “[s]ome lines (...) continue to be bred for work, but generally speaking, in the United States (...) the working ability has been diluted to some extent by breeding for a ‘breed standard’ (a predetermined description of the proper ‘look’ a particular breed should have)” (Guthrie 8).

In McCaig’s history of the border collie in America, the AKC is presented

as a bureaucratic institution, governed by people whose only care is money, not the dogs they are registering. Greed is clearly the only *raison d'être* behind the Kennel Club's attempts at acknowledging the border collie's existence. In his account McCaig quotes the words of George Sangster: "The Kennel Club is not an organization, it's a garrison. The world's largest secret society. The world's most impenetrable fortress. A stronghold, not a governing body. A psychosis, not a philosophy. (...) A body completely surrounded by suspicion, a walled society, a kingdom of fear, an island in a sea of mistrust, a monument to paranoia" (McCaig 36). The military imagery used in this fragment and the title of the book, *The Dog Wars*, clearly reflect the intensity of this conflict. The vocabulary recalls Marx's depiction of the students' rebellion against the bureaucratic and technocratic system which devours all it encounters (Marx 1986, 64). It is significant that the paragraph in McCaig's book that I have referred to as restaging the pastoral scene, is followed by this unusually short one-sentence paragraph: "Not two weeks later, the AKC moved to swallow the Australian shepherd" (McCaig 35). The machine-like moloch, the American Kennel Club, destroys all that it encounters.

There is an interesting aspect of class tension within this movement of dissent. Ritvo writes that the pedigree animal quickly became a status symbol, revealing the owner's aspirations for middle-class status (Ritvo 104). Sheepdog culture remained a working class culture and still prides itself on its working class heritage. The memoirs of H. Glyn Jones, a respected British breeder and sheepdog trial competitor, who was often invited to the US as a judge, conjure happy childhood memories of time spent with his father, a blacksmith and a shepherd, poaching in the woods and ponds belonging to the local gentry. During visits to the smithy, local farmers swapped stories of how they managed to outsmart the gamekeepers and carry out successful hunts (Jones 1994, 5-7). This class animosity transferred onto the attitude to animals. Dog shows were perceived as an activity associated with the detested upper classes, with "city folks" and the urban environment. The breeding of "useless" dogs was also seen through this light: as a whim of the rich people who could afford it. The severing of original use value from symbolic value and exchange value, was possible only in a context in which the use value ceased to have any importance. For a farmer, the border collie's herding abilities were always of primary importance. Allowing for their degeneration could result in disastrous economic consequences for the farming operation.

American sheepdog culture has embraced the working class ethos es-

poused by the British, even though, as has been proved, the age/gender/social status structure of this community is quite different from the British one. Nonetheless, this is a symbolic statement which underscores the character of the dissent: the working-class man needs a working dog. As McCaig writes, “[i]n this proletarian culture, wealthy handlers often conceal their affluence” (McCaig 17) and new aficionados quickly begin to adapt the mores: “[i]t can be funny to watch the newly sheepdog obsessed adapt to that culture that nurtures their dogs. As his (her) dogs improve, many a previously garrulous suburbanite starts to mutter like John Wayne” (17).

In the American context, the ties of sheepdog culture to the mythology of the American West deserve emphasis. While the main figure of that mythology, the cowboy, is associated with cows and not sheep, the rough masculinity, no-nonsense attitude and set of values associated with this iconic figure carry a huge appeal for contemporary trial participants. Even McCaig is acutely aware of the discrepancy between the actual social origins of the players (“it can be funny to watch”) and the cultural meanings of the practices they engage in, but within the narrative of his book, their position is vindicated as the morally victorious one.

Sheepdog Training

The working-class ethos, reluctance to social change and ambivalence related to technology, characteristic of pastoral dissent, are most interestingly reflected in the methodology (not necessarily the methods) of sheepdog training. It is, for example, quite striking, how contemporary herding textbooks refuse to reject theories of canine behavior that have been disproved by contemporary scientific findings, for example, the pack leader theory, alternately known as the dominance theory. The theory results from a transference onto the human-canine relationship of the (misunderstood) relationship between members of a wolf pack. According to the pack leader theory, the alpha wolf “naturally” enforces submission among other wolves. Even though the theory has been challenged from within the scientific community (Bradshaw, Blackwell and Casey 2009), the dog training community (Donaldson 1996) not to mention that the notion of a linear hierarchy within a wolf pack has also been discredited (Mech and Boitani 2003), these concepts persist in herding training manuals published well into the twenty-first century.

Virgil Holland, a famous American trainer and author of *Herding Dogs*

writes: “[i]n order for you to establish yourself as the alpha figure in your dog’s life, your dog must accept the fact that you have the right and ability to tell her what to do” (Holland 1994, 27). Holland’s prescription is by no means an isolated one. All of the training books discussed emphasize the need for the dog’s respect for the handler, phrasing it in different ways. The author of *Stockdog Savvy* writes: “Males generally begin to assert their dominance between about six and eight months. This is also the period when dogs may attempt to dominate their owners. It is important to establish your authority with your dog” (Hartnagle-Taylor 34). One of the top trainers interviewed for Molloy’s book, David Henry, explains his methods this way: “[T]he dog will have the same reaction to me that it would to an alpha dog chasing it off its kill: it’ll turn its head away and submit to my pressure. (...) I’m going to get between it and the stock and I’m going to growl like I’m the alpha and it’s way down there in the pecking order” (Henry quoted in Molloy 102).

The trainers interviewed for De La Cruz’s book constantly repeat the words respect and authority as key terms in the human-animal relationship: “[t]he pup must love you enough to want to please you and respect you enough to put your wishes before his” (McKenzie quoted in De La Cruz) or “[i]f your dog pushes you and challenges your leadership in day to day life, you will have a hard time getting good trial work from it. You need to have an unconditional obedience and respect for you as the leader” (Johnson-Garrett quoted in De La Cruz). A dog’s obedience is thus not seen as the result of a history of positive and negative reinforcement but as naturally resulting from the human’s display of leadership and authority. What logically follows is that showing a dog his place in the pack hierarchy should result in his obedience to the trainer.

Despite the constant emphasis placed by herding instructors on the human’s need to enforce the leading position in the pack, the methods suggested for achieving this goal are not completely aversive (cf. Marschark & Baenninger 2002). Most trainers restrict their use of aversion to raising their voice to correct a dog who is chasing sheep, gripping or splitting stock. The most extreme correction mentioned in the instructional materials I have analyzed was the throwing of an object (usually a soft one, for example the trainer’s hat) into the dog’s path and never directly at the dog. The herding crook is used mostly to create a barrier which prevents the dog from being in the wrong place (Holland, 51-52). It is never used as a tool for administering physical punishment. This lack of consistency between

the alpha wolf theory and the actual methods suggests that the theory of dominance plays a purely symbolic role. Rejecting dominance would have been akin to embracing progress and opposing tradition, something unthinkable in a culture which sees progress as leading to degeneration. Thus, this insistence on upholding theories which have long been discredited is the result of something more than simply the instructors' unwillingness to read up on new discoveries in the field of canine origin and social hierarchy. The theory of dominance is necessary for maintaining the coherence of the herding worldview: pastoral dissent is, as Marx writes, "not based on a progressive worldview" (Marx 1986, 66) and progressivism in the dog world is associated not just with breeding for the show ring but with the general belief that age-old training methods can be improved upon in result of new technologies and scientific discoveries.

The rejection of progressivism is also evident in herding instructors' approach to behaviorism. Most accounts of the history of dog training present an optimistic narrative of development and progress, of going from the dark ages of choke chains and prong collars to the more enlightened and gentler methods of contemporary dog trainers. In *The Companion Species Manifesto* (2003), Donna Haraway speaks of a "near-religious conversion from the military-style Koehler dog training methods, not so fondly remembered for corrections like leash jerks and ear pinches to the joys of rapidly delivering liver cookies" (Haraway 2003, 48). Proponents of the most popular canine performance sports: agility, canine disc, competitive obedience competitions encourage the use of "positive" training methods (Hiby, Rooney, Bradshaw; 2004), a term which in reality refers to a wide range of techniques, though all of them share a preference for applying positive reinforcement over punishment, and, most importantly for the point I am making here, adopt B.F. Skinner's behaviorist approach (Skinner 1938) for behavior analysis.

As Marx writes, ambivalence towards technology is a trademark of pastoral dissent. The rhetoric of positive training is brimming with enthusiasm for technology, objectivity and science. Karen Pryor, the author of groundbreaking and bestselling books on clicker training sees the advantage of "modern training methods" in their not being based on "folk beliefs but on behavioral science" (Pryor 1999, 3). Bob Bailey, one of the gurus of contemporary positive trainers, is known for the adage "training is a mechanical skill." For the sheepdog trainer, training is anything but mechanical, it is more of a mystical experience, which cannot be reduced to learning curves

and reinforcement schedules. He sees such training as mechanical, assuming a “one size fits all” approach which the shepherd detests. In reducing the dog’s mind to Skinner’s box, sheepdog trainers see an attack on the dog’s dignity. In effect, many of the herding textbooks emphasize the inadequacy of the behaviorial framework for teaching herding. After explaining briefly what clicker training is, the author of *Stockdog Savvy* writes: “Sorry to say, this ideology [clicker training] has been proven ineffective in stockdog training” (Hartnagle-Taylor 47).

This attitude to change and innovation also guides the sheepdog community’s somewhat condescending attitude to other activities with canines. Herding is seen as the true and natural activity for a border collie, while all others are mere artificial substitutes. Writing about how flexible the rules of sheepdog trials are, McCaig describes how the requirements can be modified to fit the setting: “Trial judge Tommy Wilson drove a stake fifteen feet away from the pen where the handler had to stand, just to make everything harder. But if I were to include a pet trick in my trial – like fetching a frisbee or rolling over and playing dead – my peers would be appalled” (McCaig 23). The word pet itself is almost inevitably used in a critical way. The trainers in the two sets of interviews sometimes refer to “petting a dog out,” that is giving away a dog who does not show promise as a sheepdog: “If I sell the dog that means I think it’s worth continuing with, or else I’d just find it a pet home” (Bill Berhow quoted in Molloy, 13). Donald McCaig writes: “we are indifferent to everything but one preoccupation: we would glorify stock work; and scorn the beautiful and the useless, the lapdog, the untrainable, the barking watchdog, the dumb but lovable family pet” (143) and repeats the cautionary warning that “border collies do not make good pets” (22). Within sheepdog culture, basing the relationship with the dog on the category of utility, or use value, imbues it with a deeper ethical dimension. This is the fundamental difference between this and other competitive dog sports emerging in the late twentieth century.

Conclusion: the Oxymoron of Pastoralism in the American Dog World

The purpose of carrying out the brief analysis of methods of herding dog training above is to show how they fit into the concept of American pastoralism, forming a system that is coherent not so much in its mechanics as in its understanding of the purpose of training and of the dog-human relationship. Animal training is always entangled in broader cultural discourses and the

training of sheepdogs for herding trials is not different. The culture of sheepdog trials is shown as dissenting from mainstream breeding practices geared towards selection on the basis of appearance. It is not progressive in that it scorns change, both in the altering of the shapes and abilities of non-humans who are the subjects of biopolitical practices, and of the evolving character of the human-animal bond: it valorizes a bond based on the concept of utility over bonds based primarily on emotional attachment. This is not to say that there is no emotional attachment between the shepherd and his dog, but it is an attachment that results from a good working relationship.

There is, of course, a paradox at the center of this position and it is the very paradox of American pastoralism. The pastoral figure of this article is not born into his ideological position but enters it willingly and – at least somewhat – consciously, dissatisfied with the “artificial” and “unnatural” direction of contemporary dog breeding, the world of dog shows and the dictum of science and progress. As Lawrence Buell affirms, literary pastoralism always “portrays a less complex state of existence than the writer’s own” (Buell 1989, 4) and if we treat pastoralism as a mode of living rather than only a mode of aesthetic representation, it becomes clear that this is the case here. The pastoral figure attempts to live out a less complex state of existence than his own, yet such an attempt will, inevitably, fail. Gordon M. Sayre makes this claim – i.e. that the pastoral attempt is doomed from the start – in an article whose title “The Oxymoron of American Pastoralism” (2013) I have cited in the subtitle of this final section.

Contemporary sheepdog trial competitors are people for whom the relationship with the dog is the primary relationship but who wish to redefine it according to criteria which they feel have been lost: criteria of use value. The paradox of the sheepdog trainer’s position is that their protest against the “unnatural” relationship between dogs and humans in the modern world is “artificial”: the American trial participant does not have a real need for a herding dog – as he does not have sheep, at least when he starts off on his journey – the need to own a true working dog is a symbolic need, a way of manifesting one’s ideological position within “dogland.” In fact, it is the absolute marginality of lamb and wool production in the United States which enables the pastoralism of American recreational shepherds to function as a vehicle of dissent. The contemporary American hobby shepherd – unlike his continental prototype – is not forced to turn to herding by economic necessity or the rigidity of tradition. He perceives the decision as a free choice but it is also a symbolic gesture of dissent. Additionally, his de-

cision to become a shepherd is facilitated by his previous experience in the more technologized urban world. If he did not have the social and cultural capital enabling him to make a living on the farm, or (more likely) if he did not have an additional source of income, this would not be a viable lifestyle. Donald McCaig, whose work I have quoted as representative of the pastoral position, is primarily a writer and became involved with sheepdogs after leaving a life on New York City's Madison Avenue.

Sayre's argument in "The Oxymoron of American Pastoralism" relies on the claim that Marx's pastoral figure, used to propose the uniqueness of American experience, is not at all American (or is American only from a very colonial perspective) because indigenous peoples in what is now the US never lived a pastoral life (Sayre 3). The model of the shepherd is foreign, alien and – paradoxically – adopted precisely to emphasize the value of tradition. Sayre's argument is particularly valid for this analysis in that it helps bring out how American sheepdog culture is based on a foreign (mostly British) model. Furthermore, even though the American shepherd may see himself as engaging in an activity which links him to the past and to a more "natural" lifestyle, it is the foreign model, that of the British shepherd, which holds more potency for him, not the neglected history of actual shepherding in America. This is only amplified by his choice of favorite herding companion, the border collie, a breed developed in Great Britain and the fascination the American herding community has for everything British. This observation is not equal to the passing of value judgments: its purpose is to prove how shepherding fits into the complex paradoxes of American pastoralism.

While I read the American sheepdog trial participant's position as internally contradictory and even somewhat utopian, it does not mean that I see it as insignificant. In 1986 Marx argues that pastoralism "far from being an anachronism in the era of high technology, may be particularly well suited to the ideological needs of a large, educated, relatively affluent, mobile, yet morally and spiritually troubled segment of the white middle class" (Marx 1986, 40). While the pastoral impulse may not lead to the resolution of this moral unrest, it most certainly points towards a diagnosis of its roots and constitutive elements. While the debate on American pastoralism has focused on the more generalized sources of the pastoral subject's discontent with modern society, I hope this article has been successful at presenting the functioning of the pastoral impulse on a micro-scale: in the world of sheepdog culture.

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