Queer Reproductions in Vergil's *Georgics* and Brian Britigan's *Golden*

Clara Bosak-Schroeder

Introduction¹

Minneapolis-based artist Brian Britigan has created an oeuvre of fantastic creatures, from the alien beauties of *Miss Space Teen Supreme* (2015) to lion griffins and skeletal mermaids in *Celestial Spheres* (2016). But perhaps none will excite scholars of the environmental humanities more than *Golden* [Fig. 1], one of six paintings for *Beyond the Western Lands*, a group show held in 2012 at Seattle's SOIL Gallery.² In *Golden*, an ox or cow looks in the direction of the viewer, though not into our eyes. Its body has been severed part-way through the torso and hangs suspended, we know not from where. Bees have colonized the body's interior and swarm in both foreground and background, while honey drips from its nostrils. Inverted flowers adorn the forehead and a tag reading "46" under another number, "522," is visible in the left ear.

I first encountered this painting while doing a Google image search for "bugonia," a Latin term meaning "ox- or cow-born" that refers to the spontaneous generation of bees from a dead bovine. The Google algorithm may have found this image through an interview Britigan gave on artsyo.com in 2013. The interview references bugonia and implies that Britigan himself mentioned it to the interviewers:

[Britigan's] impossible-to-miss painting *Golden* (see below) sparked a long conversation and subsequent post-show research about the origins of the myth that beehives can be spontaneously generated from a cow's carcass (Bugonia – it's a thing).³

The word "Bugonia" in this passage links to a Wikipedia article that describes ancient Mediterranean stories of bees born from animal carcasses.⁴ Following up on this reading of the painting, classicist Kelly McArdle tweeted an image of *Golden* in 2019 with the comment "check out this bougonia pic."⁵ As the artsyo.com interview and McArdle's tweet indicate, students of the ancient Mediterranean may see in *Golden* the

¹ I am very grateful to everyone who responded to this article and the talk that preceded it, as well as to those who rendered other aid: Jon Bosak, Vaughn Fenton, Nancy Elizabeth Green, Ella Haselswerdt, Adam Kozak, Michelle Martinez, Jacob Neis, Verity Platt, Jonah Radding, Gene Robinson, Ryan Stommel, Brian Walters, Ashley Weed, Jessie Wells, Justin Wolff, members of the Chicago Regional Workshop for Junior Faculty in Classics, and audiences at Cornell University, the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, the Ohio State University, and Stockholm University. Brian Britigan has been gracious, generous, and encouraging at every stage of the process. I am especially grateful to the editorial staff and anonymous reviewers at *Interconnections* for accepting the piece and making it stronger.

² Britigan's contribution to *Beyond the Western Lands* can be found at: <https://www.brianbritigan.com/beyond-the-western-lands-1>. For his other work, see Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/brianbritigan/?hl=en>

³ The interview is no longer online. It was last accessed on May 7, 2019 at <https://us6.campaign-archive.com/?u=4e23221b7b2b8fbab2b009e1e&id=d92e251022&e=59ef5b7ddf>

⁴ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bugonia>

⁵ The account is private. The tweet was last accessed on April 21, 2021 at https://twitter.com/_iocheaira/status/1121032345686040577

spontaneous generation of bees described by ancient Greek, Jewish, Roman, and medieval authors.⁶

In this article, I treat *Golden* as a reception of Vergil's bugonia in the *Georgics*, one of the fullest and most influential descriptions of the phenomenon in ancient literature, not because Brian Britigan has read Vergil (though he has) but because Britigan's series for *Beyond the Western Lands*, including *Golden*, investigates many of the themes of Vergil's text.⁷ As a scholar of Greek and Roman antiquity and a lover of the *Georgics*, I have framed this piece around Britigan and Vergil, rather than Britigan and another ancient source for bugonia (*Judges* 14:8, for example). But many receptions are possible and I hope that other readers will assemble them.⁸

In particular, I focus on queer reproductions in the *Georgics* and Britigan's paintings for *Beyond the Western Lands*, including *Golden*. These reproductions are corporeal and stylistic, treating both bodies and the artworks that depict them. But they are queer in different ways.⁹ While Britigan uses the style of American regionalism to critique the homophobia and misogyny of regionalism's founders, especially Thomas Hart Benton, Vergil's poem focuses on the relationship between people and other animals, questioning the division of human and nonhuman.

Here it is worth discussing explicitly what I mean by "queer" and "queering." The exhibit notes for *Beyond the Western Lands* define queerness by way of José Esteban Muñoz: "Queerness is about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world."¹⁰ This description dovetails with Siobhan Somerville's definition of queering as:

[A] way to denaturalize categories such as "lesbian" and "gay" (not to mention "straight" and "heterosexual"), revealing them as socially and historically constructed identities that have often worked to establish and police the line between the "normal" and the "abnormal" and "an attempt to challenge identity categories that are presented as stable, transhistorical, or authentic."¹¹

⁶ Osorio (2020) provides a lineage of Greek and Roman bugonias starting with Philotas of Cos in the third century BCE and explores the relationship between bugonia and other tales of spontaneous generation, especially in Vergil's *Georgics*. "According to this reconstruction, bugonia enters Greek literature due to the spread of Egyptian or otherwise African apicultural knowledge after Alexander's conquests" (28). Though not pursued here, the figure in *Golden* may have another antecedent in Hebrew scriptures: the golden calf of *Exodus* 32.

⁷ Britigan encountered bugonia first in Earth's 2008 album *The Bees Made Honey in the Lion's Skull*, a reference to *Judges*. He then discovered the *Georgics* (email communication, May 12, 2021). Though I have been in contact with the artist since the beginning of this project, I chose to develop my interpretation independently. Before submitting the final version of the article I asked Britigan for comments, some of which are included in footnotes.

⁸ By choosing Vergil as the source of this reception I am reinscribing his importance and canonicity. This might not be a good thing. On the passivity of "reception" in classical reception studies and an alternate model drawn from assemblage theory, see Ward (2019) who builds on and goes beyond Hardwick (2011).

⁹ Though perhaps both "queer" in the original sense of the word: strange, off-center.

¹⁰ Muñoz (2009, 1). I originally accessed the exhibit text online but it is temporarily unavailable while the gallery's website is rebuilt. SOIL co-founder Jay Bryant provided me with a pdf of the text on April 6, 2021. Steven Miller, contributor to and curator of *Beyond the Western Lands*, may have used Muñoz to frame the show. See Miller (2012).

¹¹ Somerville (2007, 187, 190). For challenges to this capacious understanding of "queer," see Halley and Parker (2011), especially Litvak (2011, 525-526): "It is not just that the imperial

In particular, I situate my queer reading of Vergil and Britigan within queer ecologies, the intersection of queer studies and the environmental humanities.¹² Scholars of queer ecologies have different interests and methods, but collectively argue that discourses of nature and sexuality are intertwined “through a strongly evolutionary narrative that pits the perverse, the polluted, and the degenerate against the fit, the healthy, and the natural.”¹³ Norms, policies, and laws that exclude those with trans or nonbinary sexes and genders as well as queer (i.e. non-hetero) sexualities often rely on rhetoric that casts these people as either unnatural, operating outside of the usual rules of nature, or as outlaws who have betrayed their true nature.¹⁴

At the same time, compulsory cisheterosexuality is read back onto non-human species and processes, effacing the range of sex/gender, sexuality, and modes of reproduction at work in the plant and animal kingdoms.¹⁵ While nature’s diversity has been recognized by scientists, public narratives of the natural world are still usually told straight.¹⁶ Displays of mother-father-child groups in museums of natural history, for example reinforce a sex/gender binary and reinscribe the “naturalness” of heterosexuality.¹⁷

In bugonia, on the other hand, one species (the bee) is reproduced asexually by way of another (the ox or cow), at the instigation of a third (humans), calling into question not only the givenness of sexual reproduction and a male/female binary, but the division between species, which is often defined through reproduction. If oxen birth bees, what is an ox anyway?¹⁸ While “queer” has often been opposed to reproduction, bugonia offers a queering of reproduction, allowing us to imagine the foundations of Muñoz’s better world.¹⁹

Bugonia as Queer Event

Vergil’s first century BCE *Georgics*, written before the poet’s more famous *Aeneid*, is divided into four books that address different aspects of farming. The utility of this manual-

ambitions of so much queer theory seem to render the question [of what is not queer] almost unanswerable. The problem is less that queer theory makes ‘everything about sex’ than that it lodges the ‘nonsexual’ firmly within the ‘sexual.’”

¹² Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson (2010); Azzarello (2012); Seymour (2013); Giffney and Hird (2016).

¹³ Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson (2010, 2-3). For queerness in the history of deviance, see Love (2015).

¹⁴ See Azzarello (2012, 1-29) for a history of queer studies in and against the environmental humanities.

¹⁵ Roughgarden (2004/2013). For “sex/gender,” see Fausto-Sterling (2012).

¹⁶ Alaimo (2010).

¹⁷ Haraway (1989, 30) makes a similar point. For sex/gender narratives in modern museums and recent attempts to expand them, see Steorn (2012).

¹⁸ Bugonia is a fantastic (i.e., unreal) form of reproduction, but some honeybees do reproduce asexually; see Wallberg et al. (2016). For the more typical, sexual form of honeybee reproduction, see Winston (1987). On the role of reproduction in the definition of species, see McWhorter (2010, 77). We might also view bugonia as a trans ecology, following Seymour (2017).

¹⁹ Edelman (2004) offers the most famous attack on “reproductive futurism,” but see also Azzarello’s “queer environmentality,” which “conceptualizes human beings, other life forms, and their environments as disregarding—and, at times, flaunting their disregard for—the ostensibly primary, natural law ‘to survive and reproduce’” (2012, 4).

in-verse has been much debated. On the one hand, Vergil observes natural processes in close detail; on the other, the poem regularly addresses literary, political, and mythological themes that seem extraneous to, if not directly at odds with, the mission stated in its opening lines, “to sing what makes the grain rejoice, under what star to turn the earth” etc.²⁰ Most scholars these days see Vergil’s farming advice as theoretical rather than pragmatic, its verisimilitude meant to enhance an elite reader’s pleasure. Nevertheless, the bugonia of Book 4 is hard to categorize. It falls in the midst of a long mythological section and seems, from a modern perspective, completely fantastic.²¹

While the poem primarily addresses a nameless, idealized farmer, the fourth book focuses on the experience of Aristaeus, the first farmer in Greek and Roman legend. When we meet Aristaeus, he is desperate to regenerate a hive of honey bees, lost by divine will for his crimes against the poet Orpheus and Orpheus’ wife Euridyce. It was Aristaeus’ attempt to rape Euridyce that led to her death and, indirectly, Orpheus’ as well. Aristaeus seeks counsel from his mother, the nymph Cyrene, who directs him to sacrifice bulls from which his bees will regenerate. This “bugonia,” or “ox-birth” Vergil tells us, is an Egyptian ritual (ll.287-314).²² Aristaeus’ version of the ritual is effective and the poem ends with the bees’ triumphant rebirth.

Although originating in Egypt, a land of magic and mystery to many in Vergil’s original audience, the bugonia the poet describes has been made practical, a series of ordinary steps. After a small, confined building is constructed with four walls facing in the four directions, a two-year-old ox is brought in:

With his nostrils stopped up and the breath of his mouth too
Struggling mightily he is beaten to death
And flesh is pounded through the intact hide
Until his insides dissolve.
They leave him lying in the room and strew
Broken branches beneath his ribs: thyme, and fresh cassia ...

Meanwhile the moisture, warmed in tender bones, boils up
And wonderful creatures can be seen, a sight to behold.
Footless at first, then soon buzzing with their wings
They swarm together and more and more
Take to the delicate air (ll. 300-304; 308-310).

The Egyptian bugonia depends not on an incantation or magical gift, but a unique assemblage of materials: the fermentation of moisture in the beaten (but not broken)

²⁰ All translations are mine. The Perseus Project offers a free online version of the Latin text: <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/>. The standard Anglophone commentary remains Thomas (1988). For an introduction to the main issues of the *Georgics*, see Volk (2008). For the figure of the farmer, see Thibodeau (2011). Nappa (2005) brings comprehensive commentary and analysis of the poem to bear on its political context. For a few examples of how the *Georgics* have impacted modern and early modern poetry and literature, see Simons (2001) and Haskell (1999).

²¹ But see Lehoux (2012) for a different way of understanding what looks to modern eyes like ancient pseudo-science.

²² Aristaeus’ sacrifice (ll. 538-558) differs from the Egyptian bugonia in several respects insignificant to my argument here. Habinek (1990) and Thomas (1991) debate the meaning of the two bugonias taken together.

belly of a two-year old ox that humans have suffocated, strewn with certain herbs, and enclosed in a particular kind of building.

Though recognizably a bugonia, Britigan's *Golden* represents the event very differently. Rather than being enclosed in a structure (or offered on an altar, as in the rite Aristaeus performs), Britigan's cow hangs suspended in an indeterminate space. The flowers on the cow's crown may evoke the ritual context of Aristaeus' bugonia, or the flowers and herbs strewn around the ox in the *Georgics*, but the eartag places this cow squarely in the present. Britigan has also subtly regendered Vergil's ox. Comparison with *Benton's Escape*, another of Britigan's paintings for *Beyond the Western Lands* discussed below, implies that *Golden* depicts a (female) cow rather than a (male) bull or steer.²³

Britigan has also extended Vergil by imagining the life of the bees after they emerge; in *Golden*, they have taken up residence inside the cow, its torso hollowed out into a permanent honeycomb. Unlike Vergil's ox, which has been beaten to a pulp, Britigan's cow reveals a structured interior. Britigan focuses on this interior rather than on the swarm of bees that wreath it. In the *Georgics* the ox is a depersonalized vehicle for the regeneration of the hive, not a subject in its own right. Yet Britigan's cow is a confusing subject: its eyes gaze in our direction, but not directly at us. Is the cow dead or alive, a hybrid organism or an empty vessel?

The cow's averted gaze redirects our own gaze to the ropes that restrain and display it in sexualized bondage: the female animal dismembered for our consumption. In her classic text *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, Carol Adams argues that misogyny and meat eating are intimately connected, especially in visual and verbal rhetorics that align butchering and sexual assault. In particular, Adams traces how animals become "absent referents," metaphors that disassociate their lived experience from their use as meat.²⁴ In centering the cow, the medium of bugonia, *Golden* insists on the cow as a cow even as it is being transformed into something else: a bee-hive and honeycomb.²⁵

Britigan's bugonia centers the cow's experience, while Vergil's focuses on process, on the cow as one material among many. Yet in his centering of animals, especially their suffering, Britigan perhaps inadvertently excises humans from the natural world. No human beings appear in *Golden* or other paintings of *Beyond the Western Lands*, but human artifacts play an important destructive role in several: the ropes of *Golden*, which suspend and display the cow; a train in *Tall Grass* that encircles a struggling bison, like a snake; and barbed wire in *Border Crossing*, entangling another cow and threatening to catch the foot of a deer that has emerged from its dead body.²⁶

While these artifacts, especially the train, may point to historical events of settler colonialism, they also imagine humans as having no place in the world of other animals.²⁷

²³ This runs counter to Britigan's own interpretation, which ties the ox/cow to the *Farnese Bull* (email communication, May 12, 2021). I discuss the connection between *Golden* and *Benton's Escape* in the second half of the article.

²⁴ Adams (2000, 51).

²⁵ Britigan used *Golden* to meditate on the deaths (by murder and suicide) of young queer people (email communication, May 12, 2021).

²⁶ Britigan shared the original sketch for *Golden*, which includes greater human presence: hands reaching up to pull the ropes that restrain the ox/cow and collect its honey. In this sketch, flowers wreath the entire head of the ox/cow and obscure its gaze. Washes of dark color frame the scene, implying a *Georgics*-like structure (email communication, May 12, 2021).

²⁷ Britigan would later develop a series of small portraits that focus on animal confinement in *Traps* (2015).

This exclusion is reflected by the exhibit notes to *Beyond the Western Lands*, which assert that its artists will:

Reimagine the intersection of man, nature and mythology in the fictive “West,” typically characterized as a place of wilderness outside the constraints of law and civilization.

These notes take for granted the divisions between “man” [sic], “nature,” and “mythology,” a point Britigan reinforces in his own artist’s statement:

Brian Britigan’s paintings and drawings use animals as an abstracted view of human identity. The work uses the West as a starting point for an exploration of the tension between domestic and wild.²⁸

“Domestic and wild” are softer terms than “wilderness and civilization,” the phrase used in the exhibit notes, and include a “tension,” perhaps even some entanglement of these terms, but on the whole Britigan’s paintings for *Beyond the Western Lands* oppose humans and the rest of nature. Through them we meet extraordinary animals who counter a faceless, generic human culture out to harm them. This is a straight reading of “nature,” one that takes for granted humans’ separation from a wilderness they can only corrupt.²⁹

Though *Beyond the Western Lands* hails Muñoz as queer inspiration, rereading Georgics 4 in the light of Britigan’s paintings reveals, surprisingly, how queer Vergil’s bugonia is. The event he describes cannot be called either natural or cultural. Bugonia is both, the result of human, animal, and plant bodies and practices colliding. In *Golden*, ropes hang the cow for display, but seem otherwise incidental to the bugonia. In the *Georgics*, on the other hand, human artifacts and actions actively participate in reproduction. Cows do not birth bees on their own, but require humans to set the stage and coordinate the players.

Vergil’s bees disrupt cisheterosexuality even before the bugonia, reproducing asexually by “gathering their offspring from leaves”:

And you will marvel that this custom pleases the bees:
Not to yield to sexual intercourse
Nor lose their languid bodies in pleasure
Nor produce young in childbirth
But each by each gather children in their mouths
From leaves and sweet herbs (4.197-201).

This idea (and ideal) goes back to Aristotle, but takes on particular significance in the world of the *Georgics*, where sex (*Venus*) and desire (*amor*) pose problems for the farmer.³⁰ After discussing planting times and methods in Book 1 and arboriculture and viticulture in Book 2, Vergil turns to animal husbandry in Book 3, especially the care of cattle and horses. The farmer must attend to breeding and producing the best stock, just

²⁸ The general exhibit notes conclude: “The title [*Beyond the Western Lands*] also references the name ancient Egyptians had for where the dead reside.” I find this coincidence with Vergil’s Egyptian bugonia highly enjoyable.

²⁹ Cronon (1995).

³⁰ Venus was the Roman goddess of sex and her name was used as a metonym for sex. Aristotle discusses bees in his *History of Animals* (5.21-22 (553)). For bees in Greek and Roman literature and thought, see Platt (2020, forthcoming) especially footnote 29. As she explains, “although bees are highly social animals, lending themselves to elaborate political metaphor, they nevertheless exist in a sphere adjacent to, even separate from, that of human society.”

as he tends his other crops, but here he faces a challenge peculiar to animals: their desire for sex at unapproved times and with unapproved mates (e.g. 3.130). Vergil paints *amor* not just as a problem for the farmer but a cosmic danger, one that causes “every species on earth, both human and animal, every one in the seas, and flocks and dappled birds, to rush into a fiery frenzy” (3.242-244). Yet elsewhere Vergil links diminishing desire with old age, degeneration, and death (3.60-65; 3.97): the tension between riotous *amor* and its grave absence is one the farmer must carefully manage.³¹ One way of doing this is to deny animals sex, which makes them stronger:

Nothing is more effective at increasing their power
Than to divert them from sex
And the goads of hidden desire (3.209-210).³²

Scholars of the *Georgics* usually think of bugonia as a solution to the death of Aristaeus' hive, but it also addresses farmers' fears about sexual desire among their livestock and their frustration with animal husbandry.³³ The ox's spontaneous production of bees matches and one-ups the bees' own asexual reproduction. Both bees and cattle are remade in bugonia, fulfilling the poet's injunction to “remake” the bodies of his livestock:

There will always be those [cattle] whose bodies you would like to change: ever remake them (3.69-70).

In Vergil, the birth of bees from the marriage of ox-flesh and human art further queers—and improves, from the farmer's perspective—the already asexual reproduction of bees under normal circumstances.

Bugonia is always a queer event, crossing boundaries of sex and species. By juxtaposing an ancient and contemporary instantiation of this event, I have shown the greater ecological stakes involved in how bugonia is depicted. When bugonia joins human and nonhuman action it imagines a generative place for humans in the natural world. Like the birds who have taken up residence in a postbox discussed by Sara Ahmed, the bees in bugonia have made “queer use” of another animal.³⁴ But this use is violent in a way the birds' use is not. Queer use can be queer and non-consensual, queer without mutual liberation.³⁵

Queering Style

Britigan's exploration of queerness has focused on human subjects, including *Gay Ghosts of the Civil War* (2017) and *Deux Maîtres de l'Univers en vue sur le Château Grayskull* (2015), but he has also used nonhumans to reflect on sexuality. In *The Receiving End* (2017) Britigan frames his coming out story with a cracked egg covered by bees. This

³¹ The art of directing desire belongs both to the farmer (1.197-199) and the poet (3.292). On the martial connections of this dynamic, see Miles (1975).

³² This statement applies to both males and females, but elsewhere Vergil focuses on the desire of males in particular (3.215-3.218). Roman writers often assume a male/female binary.

³³ The death and restoration of the hive is often read as a metaphor for Roman politics. See Perkell (1978), Griffin (1979), and Gardner (2014).

³⁴ Ahmed (2019, 34).

³⁵ This interpretation of *Golden* follows Britigan's own: “My interpretation centered on the idea of the exchange of one type of life for another; the body of an ox (typically castrated and therefore non-reproductive) offered as a ritual sacrifice in service of continued fertility (via the reproductive potential of bees) for the larger community. For me, it began to symbolize the actions of those who are ‘intolerant of aberration’ against those that do not fit into an expected role within cishetero reproduction” (email communication, May 12, 2021).

image alludes to the “birds and the bees” sex talk parents (proverbially) have with their children but also echoes the bees of three paintings in *Beyond the Western Lands: Golden, Numbers, and Benton’s Escape*. As my reading of *Benton’s Escape* [Fig. 2-3] will show, these bees—and those in *Golden*—are sexual signifiers. Though Britigan reinforces the divide between humans and other species, as we saw in the previous section, he disrupts heteronormative reproduction in a different way, by reproducing, but not replicating, a style of painting called American regionalism.

American regionalism was a figural style of painting developed in the early 20th century and epitomized by John Steuart Curry, Grant Wood, and Thomas Hart Benton. In the words of art historian Erika Doss, this “triumvirate” was “adamant about creating a uniquely American art aimed at widespread popularity, an art intelligible and meaningful to all citizens, an art grounded especially in the values of the American republic.” These values centered the dignity and beauty of the white male American and the hope of post-Depression regeneration through his labor.³⁶

Perhaps less obvious to straight viewers, Regionalists were also invested in cisheterosexuality. One of the most famous paintings of the movement, Grant Wood’s *American Gothic* (1930), pictures an older man and younger woman, the woman gazing deferentially in his direction and positioned slightly behind him. This painting was interpreted at the time (and has been since) as a married couple despite Wood’s insistence that he intended to represent a father and older daughter.³⁷ The popular reading of the painting, replicated by Britigan in his 2017 homage, uses a grim heterosexual pair to picture “America.”

Thomas Hart Benton, another member of the Regionalist triumvirate, wrote the values of *American Gothic* onto the landscape. His Midwest celebrates traditional farming methods employed by white farmers, as in *Cradling Wheat* (1938). White women, when they appear at all, are often nude objects of the male gaze, as in *Susanna and the Elders* (1938).³⁸

This approach to sex/gender and sexuality was self-conscious. After being educated in Chicago and Paris, Benton worked in New York during the 1910s and 20s

³⁶ For more on these themes, see Doss (1991, 67-145).

³⁷ Corn (2005, 125). Wood insisted that his own interpretation was irrelevant. For other aspects of the painting’s early reception, including “inaccuracies” viewers saw in the figures’ dress, see Corn (2005, 123). For Wood as a queer artist who queered American art styles, see Doss (2018) especially pp. 11-12. Britigan’s 2017 version for friends Helen and Pawel both reflects the heterosexual reception of Wood’s painting and subverts it by having the woman face front, her gaze meeting ours instead of diverting to her partner. This untitled work can be found on Instagram. It was last accessed May 7, 2021 at <https://www.instagram.com/p/BXISqkqDkFL/>.

³⁸ *Cradling Wheat* is held by the St. Louis Art Museum and can be see at <https://www.slam.org/collection/objects/34063/>. *Susanna and the Elders* is held by the de Young Museum and can be seen at <https://art.famsf.org/thomas-hart-benton/susanna-and-elders-1940104>. Doss (1991, 36) discusses these gender dynamics. Benton also painted scenes with a more diverse cast of characters. In *The Artists’ Show, Washington Square* (1946), for example, white women are both painters and painted. Benton often focused his representation of Black Americans on legacies of enslavement. See, for example, *Weighing Cotton* (1939), discussed by Orgeman (2015). According to Bailey (2009, 159), Benton’s representation of raced bodies—Black, Indigenous, and white—changed and became “more palatable to white audiences” over time. Unlike biblical themes, references to ancient Greek and Roman culture are rare in Benton’s work. *Achelous and Hercules* (1947) is a beautiful exception.

before returning to his native Missouri and living there for the rest of his life. On bidding adieu to the east coast, he excoriated its art scene, writing an essay that he would later publish in his 1937 autobiography, *An Artist in America*.³⁹ New York's artist community, Benton argues, had been ruined by three forces: "narrow conservative[ism]," "doctrinaire radical[ism]," and "the concentrated flow of "aesthetic-minded homosexuals":

Aestheticism in its more fragile forms seems always to accompany sexual aberration when that is represented by the simple predominance of feminine characteristics rather than the cultivated vices of bisexuality. In the case of the latter, male sexual buffooneries, accompanied by a more or less open sadism, offset any exaggerated artistic delicacy. But in the homosexual circles of artistic New York there are few who, like the gentleman in the Klondike poem, are ready to jump anything from a steer to a kitchen mechanic. Our New York aberrants are, for the most part, of a gentle feminine type with predilections for the curving wrist and outthrust hip.

Far be it from me to raise my hands in any moral horror over the ways and tastes of individuals. If young gentlemen, or old ones either, wish to wear women's underwear and cultivate extraordinary manners it is all right with me. But it is not all right with the art which they affect and cultivate. It is not all right when, by ingratiation or subtle connivance, precious fairies get into positions of power and judge, buy, and exhibit American pictures on a base of nervous whim and under the sway of those overduplicate refinements of taste characteristic of their kind.⁴⁰

While abjuring "moral horror" Benton uses moralizing language ("vice," "sadism," "connivance") to characterize the queer men—only men—of the art world. These men are themselves divided into a "male" and "feminine type" that draw on misogynistic tropes of women as "nervous," "overdelicate," and subject to "whim," and of men whose violent sexual power dissolves into "buffooner[y]." The feminine types who dominate his world are not people but things, "aberrants." Yet it isn't their exercise of taste that appalls Benton so much as what he calls "the homosexuals' control of policy," dangerous especially "because of its effects on the minds of those who support such institutions, who are apt, especially in the West, to confuse all art with sexual oddity and refuse to have anything further to do with it." This argument takes Benton's homophobia and attributes it (perhaps correctly) to the West from which he comes. Westerners are wrong, Benton implies, to "confuse all art with sexual oddity." This tendency explains some of Benton's hatred of queer people in the art world, who give straight artists like him a bad name. Yet despite this danger, Benton also seems to cast Western "confusion" as a strength:

The people of the West are highly intolerant of aberration. In the smaller cities, there are no isolating walls of busy indifference where odd manners and cults can

³⁹ Benton (1983/1937, 261-269). For the changes Benton made to his autobiography over time, see Grant (2010).

⁴⁰ Benton (1983, 265). In 1941, Benton attacked the director of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City in similar terms. See Doss (1991, 36-37). The reference to "the gentleman in the Klondike poem" is mysterious. It may allude to the work of Robert Service.

reach positions of eminence and power. Power, in smaller places, is promptly known and subject to the scrutiny of strong prejudice.⁴¹

This “strong prejudice” allows Westerners to discern what New Yorkers cannot. With their greater insight, they can weed out the odd manners and cults that have overtaken the city’s art world and threaten Benton’s artistic genius.

At the heart of Benton’s homophobia is gender binarism and misogyny. For him, aberrancy is the same as effeminacy; queer sexuality, expressed only by men, is the transgression of gender norms. Benton claims not to care about these transgressions per se, but his celebration of “the West” belies the truth: what Benton wants is a world in which art and society have been purified by “strong prejudice.” His paintings of this West celebrate its landscapes, technologies, and cisheterosexism.

Well known among art historians, Benton’s essay has not usually been a part of the popular reception of his work. Yet it is the closing words of the passage above that Britigan quotes in *Benton’s Escape* [Fig. 2-3], a diptych Britigan contributed to *Beyond the Western Lands*. This citation invites us to consider Britigan’s engagement with Benton more broadly and the way his paintings for the series interact.⁴²

In their subject matter and style, especially the overlapping, recessed forms of *Benton’s Escape*, Britigan’s paintings for *Beyond the Western Land* evoke regionalism in general and Benton’s style in particular.⁴³ But in its values, this regionalism is hardly Benton’s. *Beyond the Western Lands* brought together queer-identified artists to re-envision the “fictive West” of Benton’s imagination. Britigan has answered this call in the style of one of the fathers of the idea of the West and in doing so has questioned the basis for the fiction itself.

Britigan’s West seems Midwestern, but has been remade through its representation by an artist working in Seattle at the time of the exhibit; this is a Midwest imagined from the West coast. Though Britigan, like Benton, features American industry, he does not celebrate the humans, let alone the straight white men, to whom Benton credited the best of the country. Instead, Britigan gives us a series of deaths and transformations which critique the conquest of the land and the eradication of “aberrant” desires Benton called for.

It is especially in *Benton’s Escape*, of course, that Benton’s assumptions about sex/gender and sexuality are subverted. Central to the diptych are a bull and cow, a sex/gender binary reinforced by the central position of each animal’s genitalia, the bull’s testicles abutting the edge of the left painting while the cow’s tail encircles her vulva on the right. Topped by Benton’s words, the pair visualize the sexual mores of the West Benton describes; the framing also recalls Grant Wood’s *American Gothic* as if seen from the back.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Benton (1983, 266).

⁴² Britigan created *Benton’s Escape* “about two years” before the other paintings for *Beyond the Western Lands* (email communication, May 12, 2021). Since *Beyond the Western Lands*, Midwestern landscapes and figures have reappeared in Britigan’s work, from the bison of *Traps* (2015) and *Groundswell*, to the fossils of *Buried Bones* (2015) and a cicada sketch for his MFA thesis show (2017). In Britigan’s own words: “Much of my work features imagery drawn from my Midwestern upbringing, combining bold colors, dramatic lighting, and a strong emphasis on drawing.” Britigan (2020).

⁴³ Doss (1991, 16).

⁴⁴ For the gendered attributes of the couple in *American Gothic*, see Corn (2005, 124).

The sex/gender binary of the painting is enhanced by other juxtapositions: signs of human endeavor, including birdhouses and telephone lines, accompany the bull, while a beehive sits beside the cow. This seems to oppose human culture on one side and nature (or animal culture) on the other, the female cow, as women often do, standing in for the natural. But the cow has been literally overshadowed by a honeycomb, breaking the verisimilitude of the piece and recalling the honeycombed interior of the figure in *Golden*. While *Benton's Escape* seems to speak in Benton's own binary, heterosexist language (and quotes his words), the honeycomb has invaded those words, just as it has colonized the cow in *Golden*. Britigan has reproduced Benton's style, but queerly, through the "aberration" of bugonia.

Another World

At the beginning of the *Georgics*, Vergil frames farming as an art which humans must apply to the earth because the god Jupiter made "the farmer's way none too easy" (1.121-122).⁴⁵ The poem is sometimes seen as optimistic about human life and sometimes as deeply pessimistic, but it is first and foremost a celebration of this art and the farmer's battle against divine odds. This world is very similar to the one Benton depicts, glorifying the farmer's humble work, his insurance against starvation and other terrors of the wild. Vergil and Benton's belief in human art sits ill in our present context, where anthropogenic climate change and other environmental disasters—many hastened by industrial agriculture—threaten human and more than human life on earth.

Though Britigan's series for *Beyond the Western Lands* points forward to a "reimagining" of the West, it may also allude to a specific environmental problem of the late twentieth century. In 2006 and 2007, a few years before *Golden* appeared in *Beyond the Western Lands*, honeybees across North America began mysteriously dying. "Colony collapse disorder," as it has been named, led to huge agricultural losses and rising prices as farmers scrambled to rent pollinators and keep their crops alive.⁴⁶ If viewers have this "death of the hive" in mind, Britigan's bugonia takes on deeper significance, highlighting both the marvel of spontaneously generated bees and our desperate need for them. Rather than emerging *from* the cow, the bees in *Golden* may be in the process of building it, as indeed real bees generate all creatures who depend on pollination.⁴⁷

From this perspective, the absence of human presence in *Golden* (ropes aside) may strike viewers as simply realistic. Perhaps the role of humanity in the rebirth of the hive is to get out of the way; perhaps we are the sacrifice required for the regeneration of more than human life on earth. If Vergil presents the bugonia as one art among many, revalidating the farmer's techniques, then Britigan leaves the right relationship between humans and other species an open question.

⁴⁵ For human art and labor holding back natural degeneration and decay, see Nappa (2005, 126).

⁴⁶ For more on colony collapse disorder and the crises in beekeeping circa 2006-7, see Watanabe (2008) and Berenbaum (2014). Britigan addresses extinction more explicitly in *Tall Grass*, another painting for *Beyond the Western Lands*, in which a train encircles a struggling bison.

⁴⁷ Thank you to the audience member who made this suggestion. The idea itself lodged in my mind but I don't recall its source.

Patricia MacCormack's "ahumanism" offers one answer.⁴⁸ In this philosophy, humans are called to a radically different relationship with other beings, starting with voluntary extinction. For MacCormack, "there is a way out" of the death and destruction humans bring when they act as a global force: "Humans must embrace the death of this [i.e. their own] species."⁴⁹ Instead of reproducing, humans are called by ahumanism to care for lives (human and nonhuman) already underway.

Muñoz' *Cruising Utopia*, the framing text for *Beyond the Western Lands*, offers another answer. While surveying a range of artists and writers, *Cruising Utopia* returns again and again to Ernst Bloch's idea of hope. For Bloch and Muñoz, the hope of a better world is as important as that better world itself. Committing ourselves to optimism is a risk, since "hope can be disappointed. But such disappointment needs to be risked if certain impasses are to be resisted."⁵⁰

If we are to embrace hope, hope for the continuation of our species (per MacCormack), it cannot be a continuation of the way things have been, of who we have been. We must recognize, in Adeline Johns-Putra's words, "that what we ask of our stories and of our lives are endings (for which, read *versions of the future*) that look like us."⁵¹ To hope for an us that is not us is our task. Here bugonia might be an image to remember: the hive returns queerly, through another.

⁴⁸ MacCormack (2014), (2020a), (2020b).

⁴⁹ MacCormack (2020b, 8).

⁵⁰ Muñoz (2009, 9).

⁵¹ Johns-Putra (2019, 167) discussing Lee Edelman's 2004 *No Future*, a major touchstone for *Cruising Utopia*. Cf. Johns-Putra (2017, 181).

Fig. 1, *Golden*

Fig. 2, *Benton's Escape* (L side)

Fig. 3, Benton's Escape (R side)

References

- Adams, C. (2000). *Sexual Politics of Meat: Tenth Anniversary Edition*. New York: Continuum.
- Ahmed, S. (2019). *What's the Use? On the Uses of Use*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Alaimo, S. (2010). "Eluding Capture: The Science, Culture, and Pleasure of 'Queer' Animals." In *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, edited by Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, 51-72. Bloomington: Indian University Press.
- Azzarello, R. (2012). *Queer Environmentalism: Ecology, Evolution, and Sexuality in American Literature*. London: Routledge.
- Bailey, A. B. (2009). "Art for America: Race in Thomas Hart Benton's Murals, 1919-1936." *Indiana Magazine of History* Vol. 105, No. 2 (2009): 150-166.
- Benton, T. (1983). *An Artist in America*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press.
- Berenbaum, M. (2014). "Bees in Crisis: Colony Collapse, Honey Laundering, and Other Problems Bee-Setting American Apiculture." *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* Vol. 158, No. 3 (2014): 229-247.
- Britigan, B. (2020). "Interview with Brian Britigan." Interviewer unknown. Graphic Competitions. Accessed May 04, 2020. <https://graphiccompetitions.com/spotlights/brian-britigan>
- Corn, W. (2005). "Grant Wood: Uneasy Modern," in *Grant Wood's Studio*, edited by Jane C. Milosch, 111-136. New York: Prestel Publishing.
- Cronon, W. (1995). "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature." In *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, edited by William Cronon, 69-90. New York: W. W. Norton & Co.
- Doss, E. (1991). *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism: From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism*. Chicago: University of Chicago.
- . (2002). "Looking at Labor: Images of Work in 1930s American Art." *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* Vol. 24, Design, Culture, Identity: The Wolfsonian Collection (2002): 230-257.
- . (2018). "Grant Wood's Queer Parody: American Humor during the Great Depression." *Winterthur Portfolio* Vol 52, No. 1 (Spring 2018): 3-45.
- Edelman, L. (2004). *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham, NC: Duke.
- Fausto-Sterling, A. (2012). *Sex/Gender: Biology in a Social World*. New York: Routledge.

Gardner, H. (2014). "Bees, Ants, and the Body Politic." *Vergilius* Vol. 60 (2014): 3-31.

Giffney, N. and M. J. Hird, eds. (2016). *Queering the Non/Human*. New York: Routledge.

Grant, D. (2010). "Portrait of the Artist Before and After." *Humanities* Vol. 31, No. 2 (March/April 2010) accessed May 10, 2021 at <https://www.neh.gov/humanities/2010/marchapril/feature/portrait-the-artist-and-after>

Griffin, J. (1979). "The Fourth 'Georgic', Virgil, and Rome." *Greece and Rome* Vol. 26, No. 1 (April 1979): 61-80.

Habinek, T. (1990). "Sacrifice, Society, and Vergil's Ox-born Bees." In *Cabinet of the Muses: Essays on Classical and Comparative Literature in Honor of Thomas G. Rosenmeyer*, edited by Mark Griffith and Donald Mastronarde, 209-224. Berkeley and Los Angeles: Scholars Press.

Halley, J. and A. Parker. (2011). "Introduction." In *After Sex?: On Writing since Queer Theory*, edited by Janet Halley and Andrew Parker, 421-432. Durham: Duke University Press Books.

Haraway, D. (1989). *Primate Visions*. New York: Routledge.

Hardwick, L. (2011). "Fuzzy Connections: Classical Texts and Modern Poetry in English." In *Tradition, Translation, Trauma: The Classic and the Modern*, edited by J. Parker and T. Mathews, 39-58. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Haskell, Y. (1999). "Work or Play? Latin 'recreational' Georgic Poetry of the Italian Renaissance." *Humanistica Lovaniensia* Vol. 48 (1999): 132-159.

Johns-Putra, A. (2017). "The Unsustainable Aesthetics of Sustainability: the sense of an ending in Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods*." In *Literature and Sustainability*, edited by Adeline Johns-Putra, John Parham and Louise Squire, 177-194. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

----. (2019). *Climate Change and the Contemporary Novel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lehoux, D. (2012). *What Did the Romans Know?: An Inquiry into Science and Worldmaking*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Litvak, J. (2007). "Glad to be Unhappy." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 1 (July 2007): 523-531.

Love, H. (2015). "Doing Being Deviant: Deviance Studies, Description, and the Queer Ordinary." *Differences* 1 (May 2015): 74-95.

MacCormack, P. ed. (2014). *The Animal Catalyst*. London: Bloomsbury.

- . (2020a). *The Ahuman Manifesto*. London: Bloomsbury.
- . (2020b). "Embracing Death, Opening the World." *Australian Feminist Studies* Vol. 35, No. 104 (2020b): 101-115.
- McWhorter, L. (2010). "Enemy of the Species." in *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, edited by Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, 73-101. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Miller, S. (2012). "Q&A with Steven Miller." Interview by Amanda Maniatch. *City Arts Magazine*. September 20, 2012. <https://www.cityartsmagazine.com/qa-steven-miller/>
- Miles, G.B. (1975). "'Georgics' 3.209-294: 'Amor' and Civilization." *California Studies in Classical Antiquity* Vol. 8 (1975): 177-197.
- Mortimer-Sandilands, C. and B. Erickson, eds. (2010). *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- . (2010). "Introduction: A Genealogy of Queer Ecologies." In *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, edited by C. Mortimer-Sandilands and B. Erickson, 1-47. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Muñoz, J. E. (2009). *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York: NYU Press.
- Nappa, C. (2005). *Reading Vergil After Actium: Vergil's Georgics, Octavian, and Rome*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Orgeman, K. (2015). "Photographic Tropes and Southern Folks in Thomas Hart Benton's 'Weighing Cotton'." *Yale University Art Gallery Bulletin* (2015): 102-109.
- Osorio, P. (2020). "Vergil's Physics of Bugonia in *Georgics* 4." *Classical Philology* Vol. 115, No. 1 (2020): 27-46.
- Perkell, C. G. (1978). "A Reading of Virgil's Fourth Georgic." *Pheonix* Vol. 32, No. 3 (1978): 211-221.
- Platt, V. (2020). "Beeswax: The Natural History of an Archetypal Medium." In *The Nature of Art: Pliny the Elder on Materials*, edited by Anna Anguissola and Andreas Grüner. Brepols series on "Art and Materiality," 2020: 51-64.
- Roughgarden, J. (2004/2013). *Evolution's Rainbow: Diversity, Gender, and Sexuality in Nature and People*. Berkeley: UC Press.
- Seymour, N. (2013). *Strange Natures: Futurity, Empathy, and the Queer Ecological Imagination*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

- . (2017). "Transgender Environments." In the *Routledge International Handbook of Gender and Environment*, edited by Sherilyn MacGregor. New York: Routledge, 2017: 253-269.
- Simons, K. (2001). "Re-making the Georgic Connection: Virgil and Willa Cather's 'My Ántonia'." *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* Vol. 7, No. 4 (Spring 2001): 523-540.
- Somerville, S. (2000). "Queer" in *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, edited by Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler, 187-191. New York: NYU Press.
- Steorn, P. (2012). "Curating Queer Heritage: Queer Knowledge and Museum Practice." *Curator: The Museum Journal* Vol. 55, Iss. 3 (2012): 355-365.
- Thibodeau, P. (2011). *Playing the Farmer: Representations of Rural Life in Vergil's Georgics*. Oakland: UC Press.
- Thomas, R. (1988). *Virgil: The Georgics*. 2 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . (1991). "The 'Sacrifice' at the End of the Georgics, Aristaeus, and Vergilian Closure." *Classical Philology* Vol. 86, No. 3 (1991): 211-218.
- Volk, K. ed. (2008). *Virgil's Georgics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wallberg, A., C. W. Pirk, M. H. Allsopp, and M. T. Webster. (2016). "Identification of Multiple Loci Associated with Social Parasitism in Honeybees." *PLOS* (June 9, 2016): 1-30.
- Ward, M. (2019). "Assemblage theory and the uses of classical reception: the case of Aristotle Knowsley's *Oedipus*." *Classical Receptions Journal* Vol. 11, Iss. 4 (2019): 1-16.
- Watanabe, M. (2008). "Colony Collapse Disorder: Many Suspects, No Smoking Gun." *Bioscience* Vol. 58, No. 5 (May 2008): 384-388.
- Winston, M. L. (1987). *The Biology of the Honeybee*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.