



# Damnatio ad Bestias: *Performing Animality and Womanhood in Contemporary Irish and Galician Poetry*<sup>1</sup>

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ABSTRACT: The concomitant subjection of women and animals was denounced as early as 1990 by Carol J. Adams in *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, where she identified the intersections of discourses that aim at the subjugation of women and animals and censured those practices that animalize women and feminize animals for the better exploitation of both. More recent ecofeminist debates, however, have highlighted women's vindication of animality with the aim to recuperate one's repressed animal nature and rebel against oppressive anthropocentric and androcentric constrictions (Velasco Sesma 2017). This article focuses on contemporary Irish and Galician poetry concerned with the performativity of animality and womanhood in contemporary society and engaged in the emancipation of women and animals from patriarchal oppression. Ireland and Galicia have shared longstanding cultural bonds and, since the 1990s, have experienced a conspicuous accession of women writers who have

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participated in the feminist and environmental debates of their respective communities. This article exposes the intersecting discourses and practices that subdue animals and women, as evinced in contemporary Irish and Galician writing, and shows how poetry can become a locus of resistance and woman-animal complicity in the struggle for mutual emancipation.

KEY WORDS: Poetry; Ireland; Galicia; Ecocriticism; Ecofeminism; Animal Studies

## THE WOMAN-ANIMAL BOND

In her poem series “Sete poemas sobre leóns” (Seven Poems about Lions)<sup>2</sup> from her collection *Baleas e Baleas* (Whales and Whales), the Galician poet—from north-western Spain—Luisa Castro presents a female poetic voice in the arena of a Roman amphitheatre as part of the spectacle of a fight between lions and humans for the enjoyment of the emperor. This form of entertainment in ancient Rome, which used to go by the name of *damnatio ad bestias* (condemnation to beasts), will serve in this article as an apt trope for the subaltern position in which both women and animals have been placed by the patriarchal order. The concomitant subjection of women and animals was already denounced, as early as 1990, by ecofeminists such as Carol J. Adams in *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, where she identified the interplay of discourses that aim at the subjugation of women and animals and censured the animalization of women and the feminization of animals for the better exploitation of both.

Apart from exposing the common debasement of women and animals by patriarchy, this article examines those emancipatory discourses that seek to free women and animals from the constrictions imposed by a dominant androcentric and anthropocentric worldview. That the liberation of women and animals should go hand in hand is a joint objective of present-day ecofeminism and of environmental and animal ethics, since these theoretical and activist movements share the basic tenet of a human-animal continuum, rather than an opposition, and thereby urge humans to acknowledge one’s constitutive animality. Furthermore, ecofeminism aims to dismantle the logic of domination that objectifies women and animals (Velasco Sesma 22-23). We employ the term “performing” in our title not just because of the women and animals displayed in public spectacles or performances, as in the poem by Luisa Castro, but because we intend to delve, along the lines pointed out by Judith Butler (25), into the

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<sup>2</sup> All translations into English are by the authors of this article.



performativity of womanhood and animality in contemporary poetry, conscious as we are of the cultural traditions, social regulations and expectations behind these terms and of the complex power relations in which they are enmeshed.

This article engages in the analysis of contemporary Irish and Galician women's poetry concerned with the representation of woman-animal relatedness. We draw on current debates in ecocriticism, ecofeminism and animal studies. Ecocriticism is a capacious field of study that may encompass ecofeminist and animal-centred approaches in its scrutiny of the literary rendering of human and more than human nature with the purpose to gauge the consequences that such representations may have for the environment. Furthermore, ecocriticism has an underlying ethical impulse in its emphasis on the interdependence between human and more than human nature. As Eóin Flannery has argued, ecocriticism needs to be aware of the cultural specificity of textual configurations of nature, but its aim is to raise ecological awareness regarding the material reality of vulnerable local and global ecosystems. Ecocriticism, as Flannery maintains, promotes values of belonging and attachment to place and community, as well as sensitivity to and accountability for environmental degradation and provides us with tools to identify anthropocentric and exploitative attitudes towards nature (2-4).

These notions of vulnerability, interdependence, accountability and resistance to anthropocentric utilitarianism are central to our analysis, as one of the concerns of this article is to assess the extent to which the poetry under scrutiny is articulated around these central values and can therefore be construed as ecopoetry. José Manuel Marrero Henríquez, in his insightful study of literary animals in Spanish writing, furnishes us with a number of considerations to be taken into account in our engagement with literary animals. One obvious, though often neglected, point is that literary animals are not real animals, but textual beings with a cultural tradition behind them. However, Marrero claims that certain literary representations of animals may move us to rethink our relationship with empirical nonhuman animals as long as the text acknowledges their animality and presents them as beings with their idiosyncrasies, not as topics. Even if animals have allegorical signification, he continues, the literary text may provide important documentary cues about animals' real living conditions. Literary animals may also be presented as communicative beings that challenge the traditional association of verbal language with rationality and intelligence. Literary texts may also highlight interspecies similarities and human-animal identification that allow humans to put themselves in the place of the nonhuman animal or to give a voice to the nonhuman Other; they may encourage sensorial rather than intellectual appreciations of animal life or may renew animal poetics when ecological changes give rise to new poetic symbology.

The literary texts under analysis have been written by women poets from Ireland and Galicia in the last three decades. The comparative approach to the literature produced in both communities can be justified on account of mutually relevant social and cultural circumstances such as the unprecedented rise in the number of women writers in these two predominantly Catholic and male-dominated societies. This rise in women writers can be partially explained by the long-lasting impact of feminist activism



in and since the 1970s (Palacios and Lojo). The parallel and often joint efforts of feminist and environmentalist movements in this period have proved determinant in raising awareness about the intertwining subjection of women and nature in these two Atlantic communities whose agricultural economy has undergone dramatic transformations. To the Irish and Galician women writers' problematization of picturesque renderings of their respective natural environments (Palacios González), one must add these poets' configurations of alternative feminine subjectivities that find in animality either a powerful emancipatory trope or a recognition of common vulnerability (Palacios, "Inside the Whale").

### SPINNING HER OTHER LANGUAGE IN GOSSAMER STRANDS

Since one premise of this article is the conviction about the interplay of discourses that aim at the subjugation of women and animals, we will start by analysing a number of poems from an anthology concerned with gender-based violence so as to assess the role of literary animals in the various renderings of violence against women. In *Her Other Language. Northern Irish Women Writers Address Domestic Violence and Abuse*, edited by Ruth Carr and Natasha Cuddington, women writers explore, through poetry, fiction and drama, the resourcefulness of language and literature to address the traumatic consequences of violence, be it woman battering or sexual abuse. The anthology is structured in seven sections that range from the exposure of misogynistic discourses and practices, through "domestic violence and the violence of the domestic" (Carr and Cuddington 23), towards the struggle for survival and women's rebellion and empowerment. This broad range of situations and subject-positions for the female characters allows one to detect a comparably varied occurrence of literary animals with sundry roles and connotations. Furthermore, this transition from subjection to empowerment correlates to the twofold objective of this article, which aims to expose abuse but also to pinpoint those discourses with an emancipatory potential for women and animals.

*Her Other Language* features figurative animals which, in an anthropocentric fashion, stand for good or evil, as in Maura Johnston's poem "The Keeper" where the resilient female victim is rendered as an owl while the torment of violence is presented through the metaphor of the bat: "She was the keeper of the candle flame / [...] / the gleam in dark forested days / the owl in the blood of the bat night" (Carr and Cuddington 29). Both empirical animals, the owl and the bat, are mostly nocturnal and are thereby associated with the realm of night, but since the poem follows a pattern of binary oppositions, the metaphorical owl becomes here a figure of light ("the gleam")—probably on account of the *tapetum lucidum* in the bird's eyes that reflects light back—and stands for the tenacious woman in this poem. Johnston's choice to animalize the woman establishes an inspiring bond between the struggling female and the figurative owl, but the contrary term of the opposition reduces the trope of the bat to darkness and terror, which says more of human fears and phobias than of the empirical animal.



A similar association of the animal with the worst human deficiencies can be found in Geraldine O’Kane’s “Room”, in which the violent husband is presented as “an animal snarling” (Carr and Cuddington 55), a metaphor that attests to still deeply ingrained speciesist discursive practices that equate human with caring and “humane”, and animal with cruel and “inhuman”. To the ecocritical question as to the consequences for empirical animals of negative discursive practices such as the ones concerning the bat and the snarling animal, one could answer that much more work of consciousness raising in animal advocacy needs to be done in order to rid language of unjustified vilification of animals. Positive figurations, however, may foster empathetic relations between human and nonhuman animals in spite of their anthropocentrism.

Beyond these animal tropes of good and evil, we find in *Her Other Language* complex hybridizations of womanhood and animality, as in “Handwritten” by Gaynor Kane, in which the battered wife undergoes a process of invisibilization, as if trying to protect herself by hiding from the violent husband. The poem consists of two stanzas and while the first one describes the wife’s inconspicuous words, the second one presents the husband’s words imprinted on her skin “in yellow and purple” (Carr and Cuddington 48). In her desperate search for self-protection, the wife spins her words “in gossamer strands / within spiders’ webs / in ceiling corners / because you never / look up” (48). We are presented with a bond between the woman and the spider, both weaving out of the way so as not to be molested. Although this poem is not about an explicit metamorphosis, the myth of Arachne comes immediately to mind, because she, the wondrous weaver, was transformed into a spider by Athena as a consequence of Arachne’s woven denunciations of Zeus’s rapes. Both in the myth and in Kane’s poem the woman weaves her plaint against male abuse and in both texts the weaving act is associated with the spider’s web spinning. However, while Ovid’s version of the myth in his *Metamorphoses* sets the woman-spider connection in a context of violent female rivalry between Athena and Arachne, Kane constructs a tale of partnership between the spider and the woman, as the former hosts the latter’s words in her web. Kane’s poem provides an apt illustration of the ecocritical notion of interdependence and collaboration between human and more than human nature. Although one could object that the spider does not need or depend on the woman, either in the poem or in the empirical world, both form part of a domestic ecosystem that usually involves conflictive relations between humans and the non-domesticated animal. The poem, however, creates an imaginary space—the “ceiling corners”—where the woman and the spider can take shelter together. Johnston’s and Kane’s poems above remarkably present animal predators—the owl and the spider—as congenial to the woman’s predicament as a victim.

Less figurative and more referential to empirical animals is “Aspects of Remembrance”, signed anonymously. This poem displays a broad range of associations of child and animal abuse, and since physical violence against children is often concomitant with woman battering, this anthology includes both. The poem combines prose and verse and while the first presents “the public and private face of the





perpetrator” (McWilliams 15) and explains the instances of abuse, the second encapsulates the animal targets of exploitation and victimization. The abusive father is seen by his community as “a pillar of respectability and helpfulness and an elder in the church” (Carr and Cuddington 92), an amiable character for neighbours and friends. The text couples the public laudatory appraisal of the man with his fishing practice in male companionship and contrasts the friendly atmosphere expressed in prose with the cooking of the fish, in verse, with terms that do not disguise the violence of the process: “slippery eels / sizzling in the pan / caught netted” (92). Eels were classified as a “critically endangered” species in Ireland in 2011 (Thompson), a fact that is bound to have its influence on an ecocritical reading. Even if the poem may refer to an earlier time when fishing eels was still legal, intensive fishing has been one of the reasons for the present endangerment. Moreover, ecocriticism is expected to provide this information about the current living conditions of empirical animals that are alluded to in literary texts. The poem also raises ecological awareness by “unmasking” the violent aspects of fishing, a process of unmasking vindicated by Carol J. Adams (27). We could similarly argue that the poem makes the “absent referent”—the living animal—(Adams 13) present, as the food “sizzling in the pan” is clearly identified: “the slippery eels”. Here is another case of a predatory animal—most eels are predators—presented as a victim of male aggressive behaviour, thereby establishing a clear distinction between what should be ethical human behaviour not to kill animals for entertainment and interspecies animal violence to which this code of human ethics does not apply because animals are not moral agents (Velasco Sesma 80).

The second prose passage of “Aspects of Remembrance” contains examples of the father’s gratuitous violence against animals and against a son: “I have seen him cross the line at times teasing cats; tumbling into cruelty. [...] He beat the living daylights out of my brother, locked him in with the hens” (92). The son is expelled from the human habitat and locked in a chicken coop, which, apart from its viciousness, constitutes a case of patriarchal animalization of the child. This prose passage is followed by three verse lines with the focus shifting to the exploitation of cattle: “cows in line / mooing a sad song / leather and meat” (92). The fact of juxtaposing the father’s cruelty towards child and cats to the farmers’ ordinary use of cattle for their meat and hide establishes an infrequent parallelism of child abuse and animal exploitation, similar in a way to the previous parallelism between the recreational activity of fishing and the cooking of animals. Through these parallelisms, the poem raises consciousness about animal advocacy and seeks after a more sensitive and respectful society for both human and more than human life, even in those cases in which dominant social practices, such as fishing or farming, assume animal exploitation as normal.

“Aspects of Remembrance” finishes with another sequence of prose and verse, the former referring to the perpetrator’s hypocrisy—“he kept his bible in the car”—and to his abuse of the poetic persona and, probably, of other children—“He put bad into me, secret sin in secret places, thrusting me to smithereens” (92)—while the last three verse lines that close the poem refer to succulent peas likely to be devoured by worms: “peas in purple pods / round and green and sweet / hungry worms” (92). The trouble with this



last parallelism, however, is that a type of perverse human behaviour is equated with the natural phenomenon of caterpillars feeding on peas, not because the implicit author wants to naturalize human depravation but because of the anthropocentric ascription of vice and virtue to the natural world. We therefore observe that poetic language, in its experimental search for figurative counterparts to human predicaments, often appeals to nature with a certain degree of anthropocentrism that may be, after all, inevitable due to the human condition of writers and readers. As Roman Bartosch and Julia Hoydis point out (8), although the decentring of the human facilitates the study of nonhuman agency, there is a considerable amount of humanist hubris in the belief that humans actually have the agency and control over their impact on cultural ecologies. The problem, this article argues, lies with the distortions of the materiality of nature induced by the anthropocentric bias.

Although *Her Other Language* abounds in multifarious examples of woman-animal relatedness, this Irish section will close with the discussion of a poem by Moya Cannon which is not about nonhuman animals but about repressed human animality, a condition that causes self-denial and self-contradiction in humans—a very irrational thing for rational beings to do, as Diana Villanueva-Romero observes in her analysis of José Antonio Jáuregui's novel *Humans on Trial* (24). Moya Cannon's "Milk" is a short poem in two stanzas, the first of which refers to the uncontrolled let-down reflex that many nursing women experience when they hear a baby cry—even if it is not their own child—as their breasts start to release milk. The second stanza appraises and celebrates the situation as an elementary beneficial reaction of female bodies that defies social conventions of decorum:

This is kindness  
which in all our human time  
has refused to learn propriety,  
which still knows nothing  
but the depth of kinship  
the depth of thirst. (Carr and Cuddington 135)

Angélica Velasco Sesma (45) refers to Londa Schiebinger's discussion of the term "mammal", which entails gender considerations related to reproduction on account of the mammary glands of the mother. This category connects human with nonhuman mammals, in contrast to the term "Homo sapiens", which separates the human species from the rest. In the poem, except for the reference to stained cloth material in the first stanza, the female could either be human or nonhuman, which therefore highlights the human-animal continuum. The body reacts to an external stimulus without any conscious mental operations—"knows nothing"—responding only to a recognition of the child as a member of the same species—"the depth of kinship"—and to a physical need—"the depth of thirst". The allusion to "kindness" invites collation with the iconography of the virtue of Charity (Latin *caritas*), which is often represented as a breast-feeding woman with infants around her, but in the case of the Roman Charity, the woman surreptitiously breastfeeds her imprisoned elderly father. Cannon's poem



actually makes one single reference to an indefinite “he”: “Could he have known?” (135). Whether this “he” refers to the old man in the iconography, it is difficult to ascertain, since the referred cloth materials of denim and fustian, although centuries old, are not the usual ones in the iconography. We are rather inclined to think that the pronoun “he” in the poem refers to an abstract male figure associated with the intellectual activity of knowledge, although doubt is expressed about what he can know of the uncontrolled let-down reflex, which is involuntary and not the result of a conscious process: “Could he have known? [...] which still knows nothing” (135). Moya Cannon’s poem, therefore, presents human animality in its most positive and celebratory light, and establishes a contrast in the way this animality is experienced by women and men, as if men had severed themselves from their condition of mammals.

## SHUNNING SONGS OF DOVES AND FLOWERS

Modern Galician poetry has a foundational woman writer—few nations can make such a boast—from the nineteenth century, Rosalía de Castro (1837-1885), who challenged the common association of women’s writing with renderings of a congenial natural world and thereby refused to write complacent poetry on this kind of charming nature:

D’aquelas que cantan as pombas y as froes  
Todos din que teñen alma de muller,  
Pois eu que n’as canto, Virxe d’a Paloma  
¡Ay! de que’a terei? (24)<sup>3</sup>

An ecofeminist analysis of Rosalía de Castro’s writing is of great urgency for the assessment of this canonical writer’s configurations of human and more than human nature as well as her critique of conventional woman-animal correlations. However, the comparative Irish-Galician scope of this article puts the focus on poetry written by women poets in the last three decades. One soon observes that the range of approaches to the woman-animal question is as broad and sundry as the one discussed for Irish poetry and similarly goes from the inquiry into the common subjection of women and animals, through notions of loss and regret about environmental degradation, to insights into emancipatory discourses for the safeguard of women and animals.

This article began with a reference to Luisa Castro’s collection *Baleas e baleas*, which denounces plundering fishing practices and explores hybrid tropes of what could be called defensive “womanimality” (Palacios, “Inside the Whale”). Likewise, the poet exposes constricting patriarchal regulations of femininity often attended by concomitant configurations of animality. The patriarchal requirement that women and animals perform their expected identities according to preestablished oppressive

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<sup>3</sup> Of women who sing doves and flowers, / All say they have a woman’s soul, / So I who do not sing them, Virgin of the Dove / Alas, what is my kind of soul?





patterns is illustrated in Luisa Castro's imaginative verse about the female protagonist thrown to the lions in a Roman amphitheatre:

Diante da morte,  
qué risa,  
os leóns aborrecidos agardando o momento  
de que a preguiza nos deixe,  
a miña carne república aínda quente  
non desperta nin diante da morte, qué risa. (73)<sup>4</sup>

The woman and the lions have been objectified for the pleasure of the Emperor's gaze and for his entertainment. It is this objectification of women and animals that ecofeminists struggle to dismantle. By refusing to perform their respective roles, both woman and lions ruin the Emperor's spectacle in an act of resistance that becomes even more subversive due to the protagonist's disturbing laughter (Palacios, "Espectacularización"). This refusal to perform the required feminine role recalls Rosalía de Castro's noncompliance with patriarchal expectations about women's writing. Furthermore, this last poem in Luisa Castro's "Sete poemas sobre leóns" (Seven Poems about Lions) can be productively read alongside the poem "Handwritten", by the Irish poet Gaynor Kane, as both feature the concurrence of woman and animal to evade or obstruct the tyrant's gaze: the woman and the lions in Castro's poem and the woman and the spider in Kane's.

The denunciation of violence against women's bodies formerly seen in Irish poetry has its Galician correlate in Ana Romani's collection *Love Me Tender*. The poet and critic María do Cebreiro has said of these poems: "These 24 minimal pieces and the final fugue constitute a powerful critique of the ideologies of oppression. To a large extent, their force derives from the subversive use of amorous discourse" (4). Indeed, Romani's verse unveils the violent possessiveness of many standard expressions of love. As for the issue of animals' roles in the denunciation of woman battering, critical reception may be illustrative. The poet and critic, Anxo Quintela, in his foreword to the collection, refers to male violence in terms that may remind us of the poem "Room", by the Irish poet Geraldine O'Kane discussed earlier, when he affirms: "As men, our hearts have been dressed in snakeskin jackets. And there are things that one had better leave alone, just in case the reptile brain wakes up, the memory of the species" (5). Here too is the kind of speciesism that assigns to animals features of human depravation and identifies constitutive animality in humans as the root of all evil. One could object that this vituperation of the animal has a long literary tradition, but one central assumption of this article is that traditions must be examined and problematized by writers and critics.

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<sup>4</sup> In the face of death, / what laughter! / the bored lions waiting for the moment / when laziness will abandon us, / my republican flesh still warm / will not awake, not even in the face of death, what laughter!



Romani's elaborate verse conveys the horror of woman battering with meticulousness: "Teimou / Aprendeuna dócil na mutilación / Serás —dixo— exacta / ó meu oco" (Stubborn / He taught docility in her mutilation / You will fit—he said— exactly / my void) (17). The female victim is obliquely compared to fish caught: "soño / [...] / que descraves meu amigo desta boca / os anzois cos que me amas" (I dream / ... / that you may untie, my friend, from my mouth / the hooks with which you love me) (25). Romani's metaphorical transformation of the woman into fish could be productively contrasted with the explicit reference to the depraved father-fisherman in "Aspects of Remembrance", the anonymous poem discussed above. While the former refers to the fishing practice figuratively, the latter does so literally but both establish an association between harm done to animals, women and children. The woman as vulnerable fish in Romani's verse has a correlate in the animal trope of the drained bee in the same collection: "como abellas exhaustas ao caer da tarde" (like exhausted bees in the sunset) (37). The laborious bee is, however, contrasted with the aggressive wasp: "E alguén a veu sentada / agardando / ó pé dos avespeiros" (And somebody saw her sitting / waiting / at the foot of the wasp nests) (34). We notice the persistent anthropocentric symbolic penchant for the classification of animals, regardless of their ecological function, into beneficial, as a consequence of their profitable use for humans, and antagonistic precisely because their ecological role is overlooked. One could object that these are animal symbols with an ancient tradition, but then again, the ecocritical, ecofeminist and animal-centred approach requires reading literary representations of nature differently in this age of the Anthropocene.

A more tantalizing animal role is that of the lizard in the poem that begins: "Os lagartos vírona pasar / Observaron o seu lento caer ensimesmado" (The lizards saw her pass / Observed her slow self-absorbed falling) (30). The animal is here a witness with no assigned virtue or vice and becomes the subject of the gaze in a collection in which the woman is the most frequent speaker, as she gives voice to her ordeal. However, she is here reduced to an enfeebled object of the Other's gaze. Ecofeminism challenges the patriarchal objectification of women (Adams 4) but being the object of the animal's gaze is not tantamount to objectification because, on the one hand, human/animal power relations have been redressed and, on the other, these lizards do not objectify the woman so as to exert their dominance over her. The lizards do gain attention in their subject-position and their presence and perspective are acknowledged. There is no reference to any other human watching the woman in this poem, so despite their apparent mutual detachment, the poem creates a lizard-woman tie through the animal gaze.

Animal studies aims at placing the animal at the centre of scholarship and this is what Marilar Aleixandre's poem "as cordas do violin" (the violin strings) does, although an objective like this is not incompatible with a concern for women's ordeal. As Carol J. Adams maintains, "dominance functions best in a culture of disconnections and fragmentation. Feminism recognizes connections" (7). Aleixandre's poem, from her collection *Desescribindo*, consists of two stanzas, the first of which has a speaking



animal—we infer it is a lamb—addressing a human being whose violin has catgut strings—from cord made of dried intestine, especially of lamb: “repara: / as cordas do teu violin / arricáronas das miñas tripas” (Take heed: / the strings of your violin / were torn from my guts”) (17). Speaking animals are common in fables, where they perform as symbols of vices and virtues according to patterns of human morality that empirical animals lack. It is precisely because their animality is rarely acknowledged that Marrero Henríquez claims that these loquacious animals from fables are, in fact, reduced to silence (3-4). Aleixandre’s poem, however, which is not a fable, draws attention to the utilitarian handling, by humans, of the empirical animal and renders the animal’s voice in her poem. The author’s voice is obviously behind the animal’s words, but Aleixandre, rather than merely speak for the animal, lets the animal pronounce the admonishment. The utilitarian handling of the animal for human artfulness, as is the case of the lamb’s guts for the violin strings in Aleixandre’s poem, summons Kate Rigby’s analysis of the poem “Parchment”, by the American poet Michelle Boisseau, about the artistry of a late medieval prayerbook. Rigby highlights the way the poem, in an ecocritical mode, lays out the cost of art to the natural world and the exploitative use of nature for art’s sake. Ecopoetry like Boisseau’s inspires ecocriticism to scrutinize the multifarious ways in which art capitalizes on subaltern human and more than human nature.

The connection between the subjection of animals and that of women is also made explicit in the first stanza of Aleixandre’s poem through the allusion to an exchange of vocal cords for two legs. This barter of animal for human body organs points to Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tale “The Little Mermaid”, in which the mermaid gives up her voice in exchange for two legs so as to be near her beloved prince. This story of female torturous self-sacrifice for the sake of love recalls Ana Román’s verse, seen above, about the many ploys of amorous discourse. The mermaid in the tale renounces her under-water animality in order to live on land with humans, while the lamb is killed to provide the strings for human entertainment. We therefore observe in this poem that both the lamb and the mermaid are expected to relinquish their animality for the sake of human enhancement.

Human liberation from constrictive social regulations is not always concomitant with animal liberation and may on occasion be sought after at the cost of animal life. Such is the case in Yolanda Castaño’s “E botámonos a trotar aldea arriba aldea abaixo” (And we started galloping up and down the village) (56), a poem set in a celebration of the Galician carnival in the village of Laza. Mikhail Bakhtin identified in the carnival festivity an emancipatory possibility for the reversal of power roles and the concurrence of unsanctioned partners. Castaño’s poem may advance such liberatory prospect—especially if we understand the plural first-person pronoun of the speaking subject as a reference to women—since the poem conveys a clear release of the constitutive animality of human beings: “e pónsenos nos ollos o brillo do ollo do lobo” (and our eyes shine with the sheen of the wolf’s eye) (56). The carnival costumes also exhibit characteristic animal representations in the form of headdress: “Por febreiro desenmascarámonos / e só levamos na fronte un animal” (Around February we unmask ourselves / and only wear an animal on our forehead) (56). However, as in many other



folkloric manifestations in Spain, animals are forced to perform as targets of human abuse:

Statistics expose the truth behind the stereotype, presenting Spain as the country with the cruelest behavior toward animals in the European Union. In fact, bullfighting is simply its best-known, most visible part: every year, about sixty thousand animals are tortured in popular festivals, most of them bulls, but also horses, geese, goats, roosters, or even ants, sprayed with vinegar before being thrown onto people (Carretero-González xxi).

The last practice mentioned above is relevant to this line in Castaño's poem: "e formigas na palma da man" (and ants in the palm of our hands) (56). Among other less vicious practices, Laza's carnival includes that of throwing live ants, chosen among the biggest specimens and sprayed with vinegar so that their sting may hurt the more, to the festival participants (Harris 165). The poem depicts an old popular celebration in both its positive and negative features, but the mild, and certainly masked, reference to animal abuse remains deeply disturbing.

Urban sprawl degrades natural landscapes, ravages rural ecosystems and brings old social ties to an end. Pilar Pallarés' collection *Tempo fósil* (Fossil Time) bears witness to such loss and expresses her distress as the family home is knocked down in the expansion of the city airport. The poems in this book are not just about memories of childhood in a family that struggled to prosper or about the grief provoked by the definitive demolition of the sustaining past, but are also attentive to the damage caused to more than human nature, as shown in these lines about the speaker's caring concern for the cats from the old neighbourhood: "Van afacéndose a comer da miña man, / porque saben que nin elas nin eu regresaremos" (They gradually get used to eating from my hand / because they know there is no return for them or for me) (17). Of special interest here is the poetic subject's identification with the female cats, as both human and nonhuman animals share the same loss. Attachment to place and community, as well as the interdependence of human and nonhuman nature are two important ecocritical axes of Pallarés' collection.

Woman-animal identification of a fully liberatory kind is central to the poetry of Xela Arias, whose verse closes this Galician section. Although her animal imagery may be of limited referential consequence regarding empirical animals, it is extremely compelling in its rendering of woman's desire and sexuality, as it portrays a celebratory woman-animal bond with salutary effects for our present-day configurations of womanhood and animality:

Chego  
de espléndidos rexistros aconsellada  
bate  
en min a furia dos escualos.  
Co aceno desencaixado asisto nas sombras:  
vence  
o permiso da voluptuosidade [...] (1990, unpagged)<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> I am coming / by splendid registers upheld / pounding / in me sharks' fury. / With writhing countenance I attend in the shade / there triumphs / the permission of voluptuousness [...]



## CONCLUDING REMARKS

From this discussion of the selected Irish and Galician texts, we can infer that similarities between the two literary systems in the configurations of human and nonhuman animals and, in particular, of woman-animal relatedness, are more evident than differences. In both systems we find women poets exploring ranges of woman-animal contiguity that go from denunciation of common exploitation and abuse to complicity in the struggle for mutual emancipation. In both poetic outputs, we detect a residual but persistent anthropocentric bias in the symbolism of literary animals, a penchant that ecocriticism must examine and interrogate in order to transform writing and reading practices. In this literary production from the last three decades we also identify a rising ecological awareness that questions ordinary and widely accepted social practices that put nonhuman animals' lives at risk, especially in entertainment (music, sports, popular celebrations, socializing, etc.). Ecological sensitivity is also manifest in the centralization of the literary animal by shifting attention to the animal's point of view. In sum, the woman and animal figurations in these poems rebel against expectations of normative womanhood and animality in their struggle for social and environmental justice.

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