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Empathy Through Interspecies Transcreation

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As a vegan ecofeminist working in literary animal studies, what matters most to my research at the moment are texts that decenter the *anthropos* from their worldview, avoiding a compensatory humanism that, as Rosi Braidotti warns in *The Posthuman*, simply confirms the human/animal binary whilst denying the specificity of animals altogether. When the voice of the narrator/poetic persona succeeds in translating an other-than-human animal experience into human language, readers encounter an instance of what I call “interspecies transcreation,” an opportunity for empathy and ecosocial change.

Two female authors, one real, the other fictional, provide strong arguments regarding the power of the imagination to enable humans to experience the world from someone else’s perspective. Joyce Carol Oates has often been quoted on the capacity of books to elicit an empathetic response from readers: “Reading is the sole means by which we slip, involuntarily, often helplessly, into another’s skin, another’s voice, another’s soul.” Elizabeth Costello, the fictional alter ego of John Maxwell Coetzee, elaborates on this idea and brings it to its logical conclusion in “The Philosopher and the Animals,” the second chapter of *The Lives of Animals*, which Coetzee delivered as part of the Tanner Lectures on Human Values at Princeton in October 1997. Oates is not specific about the particulars of the skin, voice, and soul of that “another” that reading allows us to slip into; Costello, with the goal of raising her audience’s awareness about animal suffering, expresses the unlimited possibilities the imagination offers to “think [oneself] into the being of another” (Coetzee 35), irrespective of species. After all, she argues, if, as a writer, “I can think my way into the existence of a being that never existed, then I can think my way into the existence of a bat or a chimpanzee or an oyster, any being with whom I share the substrate of life” (Coetzee 35).

Costello brings to her lecture Thomas Nagel’s much-cited article “What is it like to be a bat?” and insists on an idea that Nagel himself made clear in his essay: what’s important is not actually to know what it is like to be a bat, but to be aware that “even to form a *conception* of what it is like to be a bat [...] one must take up the bat’s point of view,” and that the only way to do so is to attempt to “transcend inter-species barriers with the aid of the imagination”

(Nagel 442). The difference between the philosophical and poetic approach to the lives of animals resides, for Costello, precisely in the poets' ability to think their way into an animal's existence via the sympathetic imagination.

Animals have featured in human artifacts, including poetry, from the moment we started producing them, but not all animal poetry is about animals. There are plenty of examples in which animals are the object of a particular poem, but not necessarily its subject. Apart from their crude reduction to human vices and virtues in fables, poems in which animals feature as such often treat them, according to Malamud, "as merely a device to prompt the poet's own introspective flights of self-assessment," citing Yeats's "The Wild Swans at Coole" as an example of an animal poem that is "not, in any substantial sense" about the swans (Malamud 33). In fact, Malamud continues, animal poetry abounds in what John Tallmadge called "the excursion format," in which "animals are creatures that poets meet on adventures of one sort or another. They serve the purpose, mainly, of occasioning the poem – the conclusion of which coincides with the termination of the excursion." Once the poem ends, the experience of the reader is "contained, constrained"; it fails to "situate poet/reader and animal as coterminous; cohabitants; simultaneous, and thus ecologically and experientially equal" (Malamud 33). For this paper, I will consider representations of other-than-human animals in literature written by women to explore the extent to which they challenge or reproduce the logic of colonization articulated by Val Plumwood in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* and elsewhere. I have chosen a few texts written by Spanish poets committed to the animal cause.

Thinking the animal, voicing the animal

The clearest risk a poet takes when thinking herself into a member of another species is that of anthropomorphism. Again, ascribing human qualities to a nonhuman animal not only "confirms the binary distinction human/animal by benevolently extending the hegemonic category, the human, towards the others," but also "denies the specificity of animals altogether" (Braidotti 79). However, anthropomorphism of a more critical type, as Gordon Burghardt articulates it, can be a successful tool to raise empathy without denying the specificity of the animals involved. I agree with Burghardt's bold claim that "[i]t is through a critical anthropomorphism [...] that we can reach the point of escaping anthropocentrism,"; indeed, critics of anthropocentrism tell us nothing "about how to reach the theromorphic stage" (Burghardt 137). The reasons why Fredrik Karlsson considers the ethical implications of critical anthropomorphism are worth quoting here:

If human embodiment, and the implied human-centered thinking, would be combined with a genuine ability of human beings to think impartially or be

empathetic to the extent that non-human beings were granted moral standing, then even such a species-centric thinking could conclude biocentric or ecocentric norms (here referring to theoretical positions granting moral standing to life in general, or ecosystems, respectively). (708)

There are abysmal differences between an anthropomorphism that reduces the animal to a mere transcript of human attributes and that which emerges from an attempt to translate and recreate the experience of a member of another species into a language that humans can understand and empathize with. The result of that attempt is “interspecies transcreation.”

The task of transcreating into human discourse any form of nonhuman experience is one which must be approached with self-awareness and humility, precisely to avoid projecting onto the other our own experience. From her particular situatedness as a human being, the interspecies transcreator acknowledges that a) although nonhuman animals do not have a voice in human politics, they are not voiceless (they successfully communicate among themselves and with other species) b) human animals have (generally) a political voice and the capacity to communicate among themselves and with members of other species through articulated speech; c) interspecies communication is possible, as it is among speakers of different human languages, after the species involved have learned the other’s communicative codes; d) studying animal languages requires different tools from those used when learning a foreign human language, one of which is the sympathetic imagination; and e) in the transcreation process, the human assumes her role as a filter, not as a model, that works to make the other animal’s experience understandable to other human beings.

The poems: *Naciendo en otra especie. Antología de poesía Capital Animal* (2016)

My corpus for this paper consists of a selection of poems taken from an anthology published with the manifest intention of raising awareness of the plight of nonhuman animals in the Anthropocene. *Naciendo en otra especie*, (*Being born in another species*)¹ was published in 2016 as part of the Capital Animal project, a platform designed to bring together art, culture, philosophy, literature, and animal rights activism. As expected in a volume of this nature, not a single text can be found that fits into the “excursion format” of Tallmadge’s taxonomy. Even in those cases in which animals provide a vehicle for self-reflection, it is always about the animal(s) featured in the poem, either as protagonists or co-protagonists with a human that usually acts as a poetic persona. All animals, human and nonhuman, starring in this anthology are individual, sentient beings, different but equal in their share of

¹All translations are mine.

the substrate of life. Imagining what it is like to be in a body that experiences fear, joy, pain, hunger, or warmth should not be so difficult, even if that body was born in another species.

Naciendo en otra especie is not comfortable reading. One of the editors, Ruth Toledano, describes the collection as an answer to the violence exerted on animals and the shame of belonging to the species that inflicts it (Toledano 9). Most forms of such violence find their way into the pages of the book, among others, animal neglect and abandonment, the suffering of animals raised for food and other products, and the dreadful, traditionally rural practices of drowning surplus kittens and puppies, hanging dogs, or stoning cats. Even if the human-animal encounter occurs at a distance or has not even taken place physically, the poetic persona is never a silent witness, but one politically committed to the animal cause. Even in the more familiar experiences shared between humans and animals as companion species, the individuality of the nonhuman companion is invariably stressed. In fact, the rhetorical figures of choice seem to point at the fascination exerted by the animal's ultimate inscrutability, beautifully expressed in M. Cinta Montagut's "EONTA"² and "MISHA", and in the scratch the dedicatees of Ana Pérez Cañamares's "Amis gatas les doy agua" ("I give my cats water") give the human speaker after a day full of feline-animal exchanges, to remind her "that tenderness is not a commodity" ("que la ternura no es una mercancía"; Pérez Cañamares, "A mis gatas" line 15). Indeed, whether they condemn atrocities or celebrate joyous human-animal relationships, the poems included in *Naciendo en otra especie* constitute a political animal manifesto.

Marta Navarro García's "THELMA, LOUISE Y YO, INSTRUCCIONES PARA SER FELIZ" ("Thelma, Louise and I, instructions to be happy"), and Leele, "MIS HERMANOS" ("My siblings"³) provide two instances of inter-species transcreation in their presentation of the human speaker and her nonhuman animal companions as members on equal footing in a group where individual needs and traits are acknowledged. The "I" in Navarro García's poem presents herself as a member of a pack, "a fearless pack of dogs" ("una manada sin miedo a la vida"; Navarro García line 23) in which she is the only human. Human and canine needs are accounted for in the set of instructions to spend a day of shelter and freedom in the forest: things to take (books, a compass and a sandwich for the human, bowls for food for the dogs) and things to leave behind (the human's mobile phone, the dogs' leashes). Once in the forest, the three embark on an exploratory journey, where the human recognizes "the grandmother's songs" ("las canciones de la abuela"; line 11), "my father's words of mint and tobacco" ("las palabras de

²Since not all poems have titles, I have capitalized those of the poems that have them, while referring to the untitled ones by the first line.

³Although the original in Spanish is grammatically marked as masculine, it is an instance of the controversial use of masculine generics. I have chosen to translate it by the gender-inclusive term.

menta y tabaco de mi padre”; line 13); and the dogs “clean grass to dig for hours and hours” (“hierba limpia para escarbar horas y horas”; line 14), and “the top of a mountain where to howl in freedom” (“la cima de un monte donde aullar en libertad”; line 15). “The voice of our ancestors” (“La voz de nuestros antepasados”; line 10) seems to be the same for the three of them, as are “the paths to recover the smell” (“los caminos donde recuperar el olfato”; line 12). Thelma barks, Louise responds by wagging her tail as she runs up the slope, and the speaker observes, probably conceiving the resulting poem.

Leele, quasi-Franciscan poem contains 17 lines, 15 of them consisting of just one word, each corresponding to one verb used as predicate for the subjects that appear in the two final lines of the poem: “my siblings of flesh/ my siblings of water” (“mis hermanos de carne/mis hermanos de agua”; Leele, lines 16–17). The verbs that form the one-word predicates designate the vocal expressions of nonhuman animals of different species (bleat, bark, meow, chirp, trill, moo), activities that they can perform literally and humans only metaphorically (ruminate) or metonymically (fly), and others that humans and diverse animal species can perform (howl, sing, dive, travel, jump, climb, gnaw). Irrespective of the species they belong to, all members of this bond of siblings share their basic biological makeup: flesh and water. Like Navarro García’s poem, “MIS HERMANOS” succeeds in presenting humans and nonhuman animals as; Malamud (33) had wished: “coterminous; cohabitants; simultaneous [...], ecologically and experientially equal.”

Marta García Navarro and Ouka Leele provide us with clear examples of interspecies transcreations, decentering the *anthropos* from their textual universe. Other poets may choose to use anthropomorphism critically, without denying nonhuman specificity, to provoke an empathetic response from a reader. As the contextual information preceding the poem suggests, Katy Parra’s “GRANJA AVÍCOLA” (“Poultry farm”) was inspired by the rescue of 46 “broilers” in León in April 2014, after the lorry that was taking them to the slaughterhouse suffered an accident. The speaker is not one of the fortunate birds, but a caged female that reflects on her condition as prisoner and the auspicious rescue of her brothers. Divided in five stanzas, irregular in rhyme, rhythm and number of lines, a certain regularity is provided by the fact that all but the fourth begin with the number 46, which, in stanzas 1, 2 and 5 indicates the number of bars that “separate life from hell” (“interponen la vida y el infierno”; Parra line 2), and, in stanza 3, the number of “brothers [that] hit the news today,/because a strange miracle decided their fate” (“hermanos [que] fueron noticia hoy/porque un milagro extraño desdijo su destino”; lines 12–13). In contrast, stanza 4 begins with the personal pronoun “Yo” (“I”), which leaves no doubt as to the speaker’s species, anticipated in those lines where she laments “yielding my offspring to nothingness/inside a shell,/with brief promises/of an aborted future” (“ceder mis hijos a la nada/dentro de un cascarón,/con breves promesas/de un futuro abortado”; lines 4–

7), and the “defenceless shelter of my castrated wings” (“amparo indefenso de mis alas castradas”; line 11). In contrast with her freed brothers, the terrible situation from which she addresses the reader prevents the bird from doing anything other than keep “changing/my feathers and my dreams,/in this dark prison,/where I cannot even turn around,/with my voice amputated/ and my days numbered” (“mudando/mis plumas y mis sueños,/en esta oscura cárcel,/donde no puedo darme ni la vuelta,/con la voz amputada y los días contados”; lines 14–18).

In dedicating another untitled poem “To Turco, the abandoned dog that saved human lives in Haiti earthquake” (“*Nada me dicen los nombres*” 111), Ana Pérez Cañamares identifies the poetic persona as the dog that made the headlines in 2010 after saving eighteen people in Haiti’s devastating earthquake. Two years before, a group of soldiers doing target practice in Tarifa had found the young Labrador wandering aimlessly, malnourished, dehydrated, and badly hurt. His neck had been slit to remove the microchip that could have helped locate the human who abandoned him, and he bore traces of stoning in his bruised muzzle. The dog was so traumatized that he could not bark for almost a year. In his role as the poetic “I,” Turco reflects on these events and, in so doing, reveals his ability to access realms of knowledge found in a music that our species, trapped by distracting names, cannot hear.

Turco insists on the meaninglessness of names from the opening of the poem: “Names tell me nothing:/the first one they gave me/was ripped from my neck./In a piece of metal/they hid their conscience./My voice disappeared:” (“*Nada me dicen los nombres:/el primero que me dieron/me lo arrancaron del cuello./En un cacho de metal/ocultaron su conciencia./Desapareció mi voz*”; Pérez Cañamares, “*Nada me dicen los nombres*” lines 1–6). Readers familiar with the dog’s story should recognize in these first lines his sad background: the ripped neck, the extracted microchip, and the lost bark. Experience has taught Turco about the cruelty of humans, but also about their vulnerability and the value of his ability to hear “the song that you never stop singing” (“*la canción que no dejáis de cantar*”; line 11), a music that does not escape the dog even when played underground. Turco expresses the vulnerability of the human body as his canine perspective presents it to him, establishing no terminological differences between human and nonhuman animal body parts. “[T]he anguish of the muzzle/and the claw that clings to life” (“*[L]a angustia del hocico/y la garra que se aferra a la vida*”; lines 16–17) reveal in canine terms the animality of humans that only a dog can detect and rescue: “I recognize your weakness/and play with it without scratching it/like a precious ball./I take it between my jaws and bring it to the light” (“*Reconozco vuestra debilidad/y juego con ella sin arañarla/como con una preciosa pelota./La cojo entre las fauces y la saco a la luz*”; lines 18–20).

Interspecies transcreation, including critical anthropomorphism, may be used to demonstrate that the capacity to project oneself back to the past or forward into the future, and to reflect about one's present condition, is not exclusive to the human species. The new human and nonhuman meet in shared thought and feeling, as well as shared vulnerability.

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