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Alicia Puleo (ed.), *Ecología y género en diálogo interdisciplinar* (Madrid: Plaza y Valdés editores, 2015), 413 p.



If T.S. Eliot had been writing from or about Spain, he might well have considered August the cruellest month. In truth, he might not even have picked a month, choosing instead the whole summer season, and not just because of its unbearably high temperatures. The summer of 2015—the hottest on record—was, indeed, particularly cruel. In addition to the abhorrent but all-too-common practice of abandoning other-than-human companions when the time to go on holiday arrives, there was an increase in the intensity of forest fires and an alarming escalation of cases of violence against women. August also announced Rompesuelas as the next bull to be gruesomely speared to death in the infamous tournament celebrated in Tordesillas every September. Being away from Spain, as I usually am during the month of August, the news that reached me from my country made me look at it with a mixture of sadness, rage, and repulsion. Fortunately, one of the books I had taken with me to read over the summer holidays was this superb collection edited by a pioneer of ecofeminism in Spain, Alicia Puleo. The twenty-three essays included in *Ecología y género en diálogo interdisciplinar* explore from different angles the pervasive thought patterns that consent and condone these and other atrocities: an episteme informed by an anthropocentric, androcentric gaze which relegates to a secondary position whatever is non-human and non-male. Reading this volume took me back to the many voices in Spain who demand change and are actively working on making it happen, both in academia and through grassroots activism.

As Alicia Puleo explains in the introduction, this book is the result of a three-year research project on gender equality within a culture of sustainability, with the ultimate goal of advancing a theoretical framework to generate practices oriented to achieving real equality between men and women, fostering human development, education in values, environmental sustainability and respect for other-than-human nature. The resulting volume is truly an interdisciplinary one since it brings together scholars from the fields of art history and performance, literary criticism, sustainable development, philosophy, psychology, medicine, law, and theology. Puleo also warns that the reader should not expect to find a dominant point of view summing up the voices of all the participants in this

volume, but rather a diversity of slants, corresponding to the debates and different standpoints adopted as they have evolved over the three-year period (11). This makes, of course, for a much more fruitful debate which continues long after the book is closed.

Ecología y género en diálogo interdisciplinar is divided into three thematic sections: *Cuerpos* (Bodies), *Territorios* (Territories) and *Resistencias* (Resistances). *Cuerpos* opens up with “Sesgos de género en medio ambiente y salud,” by endocrinologist Carme Valls-Llobet, which elaborates on the dangers of environmental pollution for the human body, paying special attention to the pernicious effects of endocrine disrupters on the female, which range from early puberty to an increase in cases of breast cancer. Even though many of the objectives set up in the Environmental Health Action Plan for Europe 2004-2010 have not been met, Valls-Llobet commends that it has at least contributed to confirming the connection between environmental pollutants and health, and insists on the need to train health professionals in environmental medicine, beginning at the university level—a training which should take into account the physiological differences in the way male and female bodies react to environmental pollution. In “De lo anatómico a lo simbólico: el cuerpo femenino en el diván psicoanalista,” psychologist Pilar Errázuriz Vidal focuses on the androcentric bias of cultural interpretations of the female body at a symbolic level, which is also reflected in Lacan’s conceptualization of the symbolic order as the Law of the Father, thus rendering the masculine as the universal One. Errázuriz Vidal observes, however, that the movement from the Freudian to the Lacanian paradigm inscribes the differences between the genders explicitly in the symbolic order, thus evidencing the cultural rather than the anatomical aspects of this differentiation, which should prevent them from being naturalised.

Lucile Desblache’s essay “Las otras víctimas de la moda” turns to other-than-human bodies, those of the animals used in the fashion industry. After referring to the numerous studies which confirm that women are more concerned about other-than-human animals than men, she elaborates on the apparent contradiction that they frequently display little concern about the origin of their cosmetics, clothes and accessories. This is certainly not uncommon, but Desblache seems to overlook the fact that women have also been key actors in campaigning against the use of animals in fashion and leaders in producing alternatives (the late Anita Roddick or Stella McCartney are some of the names that spring to mind). Particularly suggestive is her invitation to rethink fashion from the perspective offered by 21st-century new materialisms, one in which other-than-human animals become the source of inspiration for articles of fashion which celebrate the diversity of “vibrant matter.” Scholar and artist Verónica Perales Blanco, whose work can be found on the cover and in the creative writing and arts section of this issue, also focuses her attention on other-than-human animals, sharing with the reader the transformative power of the gaze after her own met, dwelled on, and

was captivated by those of the female gorillas she drew as part of her *Grandes simios en femenino / Grands singes en féminin* project (2009-11), a collection of portraits of female great apes. Perales Blanco's inspiring "Reflexiones de una retratista de gorilas" mixes the personal notes of her journey of (self-)discovery during the realisation of the project with the theoretical framework that informed her own gaze, in a magnificent exercise of empathy whose force is also revealed in the illustrations that accompany her superb essay.

As Iván Sambade Baquerín and Laura Torres San Miguel argue in "Cuerpo e identidad de género en la sociedad de información," the traditional objectification of the female body is far from being eradicated from the mass media. They observe that, despite the politically-correct image of gender equality largely adopted by the media, traditional patterns of masculinity are still reproduced, together with an unrelenting hyper-sexualisation of the female body. Objectification is also palpable in the new forms of oppression that have emerged in social networking systems (zing, grooming, sexting or sextortion), of which women are the main victims.

Although it would be bold to consider Anne Finch Conway as an ecofeminist *avant la lettre*, Concha Roldan's essay, "La filosofía de Anne Finch Conway: bases metafísicas y éticas para la sostenibilidad," traces the metaphysical and ethical foundations for sustainability present in the English philosopher's work, which make it compatible with ecofeminist postulates. In proposing a monist solution to the mind-body dualism, Conway stipulated the interdependence of all living organisms, a key concept for ecology, while her idea of universal convertibility and sympathy as the metaphysical basis for sustainability are of special interest for ecofeminist studies.

In the last essay of this section, "Los cuerpos colonizados: las religiones contra las mujeres," Margarita Pintos de Cea-Naharro and Juan José Tamayo Acosta agree in considering religions as one of the most powerful, resistant and influential forces in the legitimisation of patriarchy. They study the way religions have colonised the body, presenting it as an obstacle to salvation, and point at the new avenues opened up by feminist and ecofeminist theologians, concluding with Eduardo Galeano that no significant change will occur until religions start perceiving the body as a site for celebration.

The section *Territorios* opens up with the essay "Cuatro tesis sobre la asimetría de género en la percepción y actitudes ante los problemas ecológicos," in which Isabel Balza Múgica and Francisco Garrido Peña share the results of a quantitative study that reveals the different ways in which men and women perceive and respond to environmental problems. Avoiding any sort of essentialism, they establish that this gender asymmetry is not ontological, but the result of historical contingency, but helps to signal ecofeminism's key role in helping to overcome some of the obstacles that political ecology has traditionally encountered. In "Cuidado y responsabilidad," María Teresa López de la Vieja ponders whether the term "care" is the most appropriate one to apply to the

ethical system that should inform the way humans relate to the other-than-human. Given that the ethics of care usually remain at the level of the concrete and immediate, and that, to a certain extent, it helps to maintain a hierarchy between the caregiver and the cared-for, López de la Vieja proposes “responsibility” as a preferable term.

Eva Antón Fernández’s “Una lectura ecofeminista de la novela de anticipación actual” is the first of the two essays dealing with fictional landscapes included in this section. Antón Fernández’s looks at the differences between male and female authors in their perception of imagined future societies, focusing on the works by Elia Barceló, Emilio Bueso, Michel Houellebecq, and Rosa Montero. Limiting her observations to the novels analysed, she concludes that empathy towards other-than-human nature is a key element in the fictional future societies envisioned by women writers. In “Utopías feministas: las dualidades rotas,” Ángela Sierra González analyses the worlds created by Ursula K. Le Guin in *The Left Hand of Darkness* and Marge Piercy in *Woman at the Edge of Time*. As they convincingly project alternative worlds in which gender dualism has disappeared, Sierra González argues, they constitute successful feminist utopias.

The role played by dominant national narratives in the shape a territory takes in the human imagination, and the ensuing political public policies adopted, is the subject of Paula Gabriela Núñez’s “Patagonia argentina, relatos sobre naturaleza y humanidad.” National discourses presented Patagonia as a desert, consequently reducing it to the category of a hostile territory in need of domestication, which has led to the overexploitation of the region. For Núñez, it is necessary to recover alternative narratives which antedate national discourses, such as personal memories of small producers, in order to allow for the emergence of alternative means of production. Micaela Anzoátegui and María Luisa Femenías, for their part, take a look at urban planning as another aspect of the androcentric worldview which has rendered the city masculine, while the natural environment is indexed as the inferior, feminine other. In “Problemáticas urbano-ambientales: un análisis desde el ecofeminismo,” they look into the narratives that blamed “untameable” nature for the floods which in April 2013 seriously damaged 50% of the city of La Plata in Argentina, leaving out other more significant reasons for the devastation, such as abusive urban planning which had drastically reduced the amount of green areas around the city or the incorrect disposal of urban solid waste.

Similar to Perales Blanco’s essay in the previous section, M^a Teresa Alario Trigueros’s “Tejer y narrar en la plástica española contemporánea” examines the power of visual art to raise awareness. She looks at the narrative possibilities of weaving as an ecofeminist tool for artistic expression in her study of the works by textile artists Magda Bolumar, Teresa Lanceta, and Andrea Milde.

Of the several cases of grassroots activism included in the last section of the book, *Resistencias*, Georgina Aimé Tapia González’s “Aportaciones de las mujeres

indígenas al diálogo entre filosofía y ecología” explores the ecofeminism of indigenous women, focusing on the life trajectory of traditional doctor and activist María de Jesús Patricio Martínez, whose activism is the result of the “us-centred” worldview of Amerindian people and the feminism of Zapatist women. The indigenous women who defend the rights of both women and the land are naturally aware that true justice requires its application to all living organisms. Emma Silipandri’s “Una mirada ecofeminista sobre las luchas por la sostenibilidad en el mundo rural” looks into the way their participation in agro-ecological projects allowed women in rural areas in Brazil to step out of the roles which tradition had assigned to them in order to occupy a prominent position in the struggle for food, while bringing to the agenda issues of gender inequality which had not previously been addressed by their male partners.

Reading can also be an act of resistance, and re-reading a book from a different perspective often proves to be a very successful one. The essays by Teo Sanz and Carmen Flys Junquera are two excellent contributions to the volume coming from the field of ecocriticism. In “La Ecocrítica, vanguardia de la crítica literaria. Una aproximación a través de la ecoética de Marguerite Yourcenar,” Sanz looks at the French writer’s work from an ecocritical perspective, concluding that it deserves more attention from this field of literary analysis. However, he warns that her work may not lend itself to an ecofeminist reading given that Yourcenar successfully overcame the anthropocentric gaze, but not the androcentric one. Carmen Flys Junquera’s “Ecocrítica y ecofeminismo: diálogo entre la filosofía y la crítica literaria” nicely complements Sanz’s essay, as it explores the way ecofeminist philosophy has permeated an area of ecocriticism which has produced interesting fruits. After looking at the works of authors such as Linda Hogan, Anne Pancake or Octavia Butler from an ecofeminist perspective, Flys Junquera concludes that they may indeed provide the type of ethical narrative answer suggested by Val Plumwood.

Uniting within itself the non-human and the non-male, the female monster may safely be taken as one of the most abhorrent types of otherness from an anthropocentric and androcentric standpoint; for that very reason, this figure can also serve as a powerful site of subversion and resistance. This is the subject of Carmen García Colmenares’s “Por una genealogía de contra-subjetividades alternativas,” where she looks at the use of the traditional myths of Lilith and Melusine to counter-attack emerging patterns of female identities which sadly evoke traditional ones, as a result of the confluence of neoliberal politics and postmodernity in popular culture. She finds instances of subversion of these two popular myths in the novels of Angela Carter and Antonia Byatt, the artwork of Marion Peck and Marina Núñez, and the musical compositions of Lidia Pujol.

Dealing also with the representation of women in popular culture, Angélica Velasco Sesma’s “Más allá del mecanicismo: heroínas ecológicas del imaginario actual” analyses the image of the “natural woman” in three popular films: *Ferngully*

(1992), *Pocahontas* (1995) and *Avatar* (2009). She appropriately concludes that, although the films cannot seriously be taken as providing examples of gender equality, they do offer interesting explorations of societies based on egalitarian and environmental values, presenting women as instrumental in bringing about change.

In “Del patriarcado como sistema alquímico a la alternativa: imaginario del don,” Kaarina Kailo rejects the discourses that naturalise capitalism and looks into the traditional worldview of Finno-Ugric peoples who, aware of the interdependence of human and other-than-human nature, observe a gift economy which, Kailo argues, may have its origin in a forgotten matriarchal society. Kailo asks for the recovery of eco-mythologies found in traditional fairy tales which focus on sustainable eco-social models but have been overlooked in favour of epic tales of violent conquests.

María José Guerra Palmero looks at the work of ecofeminist Mary Mellor in “Ecofeminismos materialistas. Política de la vida y política del tiempo,” which she associates with the critical ecofeminisms outlined by Alicia Puleo in *Ecofeminismo para otro mundo posible* (2011). Guerra Palmero brilliantly articulates Mellor’s criticism of the *homo economicus* construct, focusing on the need to reconcile the understanding of time by capitalist productivism with the biological time of human needs and the ecological time of nature.

Alicia Puleo’s own contribution to the volume, “El ecofeminismo y sus compañeros de ruta. Cinco claves para una relación positiva con el ecologismo, el ecosocialismo y el decrecimiento,” provides an excellent conclusion to the volume. She identifies five “keys” or rules which ecofeminism and other movements of resistance (ecosocialism, the ecological and the degrowth movements) should observe if they want to establish a productive and healthy relationship. She finds it necessary to comply with these rules in order to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past, when women’s rights were relegated to the background after feminists had actively participated in achieving the goals of other movements. It is important to highlight that, for Puleo, ecofeminism should always remain critical; that is, it has to preserve the emancipatory legacy of the Enlightenment. Granting that some of the many faces of Modernity have taken us to our present ecological crisis, she insists on the need to remember that the philosophy of the Enlightenment struggled fiercely against religious and political oppression (398).

Ecología y género en diálogo interdisciplinar delivers what it promises and yet a bit more: itself participating in a gift economy, it is available as open-access e-book from the publishing house Plaza y Janés. With hindsight, I realise now that the gravity-defying drops of water on the cover designed by Verónica Perales Blanco anticipated the book’s refreshing content, much needed and greatly welcome in that hot, cruel August of 2015.

Works cited

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