

Kathleen Honora Connolly  
Western Oregon University, USA  
connollyk@wou.edu

Book review: Katarzyna Olga Beilin, *In Search of an Alternative Biopolitics: Anti-Bullfighting, Animality, and the Environment in Contemporary Spain* (Columbus: Ohio State UP: 2015), 389pp.



In this groundbreaking work, Katarzyna Olga Beilin demonstrates how the violence perpetrated amongst humans has its roots in humanity's attitude towards animals and the environment. The distance created by the human/animal divide is the first step at a discourse that permits those regarded as "animals" to be tortured or destroyed for our own ends. As these acts of violence are applied to humans and our environment, inevitably this destroys humankind, as well. Beilin examines bullfighting and its imbrication in a deadly Spanish national biopolitics as one cultural extension of the human/animal divide, drawing on Foucault and Agamben's theories of biopolitics and bare life, as well as interviews, performance theory, and ethnography. In contrast to the vast majority of studies on bullfighting by Hispanists and anthropologists, Beilin not only analyzes pro-bullfighting stances, but also engages with the discourses and efforts of the anti-bullfighting movement over the past two centuries, demonstrating the positive change that it has effected on society at large over time.

Beilin begins the work by demonstrating how the juxtaposition of human and animal is at the foundation of modern biopolitics in Spain. Specifically, Beilin analyzes the symbolic power of bullfighting and the arguments that have been advanced both for and against the practice. As a national feast, bullfighting figures centrally in debates on national identity, tradition, masculinity, love and death, and other topics that structure a state biopolitics as well as alternative discourses of resistance. Key to this is Achille Mbembe's concept of *necropolitics* which, when applied to the biopolitics of bullfighting, becomes a spirituality that connects eroticism to violence and sacrifice. Via linguistic and cultural frames, this rhetoric builds, maintains, and justifies oppressive regimes that kill and let die. This morbid spirituality has been a cornerstone of Spanish "difference" and claims of superiority over other cultures, a claim that carries with it deep contradictions: while on the one hand the bullfighter, and by extension the Spanish people, seem to be freer, able to confront death with courage, this actually animalizes them. Just as the bullfighter, in the dance of 'kill or be killed,' becomes "bare life" in the ring, so do the Spanish people, manipulated by the rhetoric of necropolitics and spirituality, sacrifice themselves for the elites in wars. Bullfighting is thus used as a tool to manipulate as well as to provide catharsis, in which the people take out their anger and frustrations on the bull, instead of seeking real social change.

Beilin demonstrates how Hispanism has been complicit in promoting this necropolitics of Spanish identity, beginning with the postwar Hispanists in exile, who, in addition to promoting the literature of the Generation of 27 and a love of the Republic,

also spread the myth of Spanish exceptionalism based on the spirituality they believed emanated from bullfighting. Key to this is Federico García Lorca and his *El teoría y juego del duende* (1932). Beilin engages with well-known bullfighting enthusiasts such as Savater (*Tauroética*, 2011) and is refreshingly critical of Ortega y Gasset's rather weak and unsubstantiated pro-bullfighting stance. However, she dedicates most of the work to authors that have largely been ignored by Hispanism—the voices of resistance. Pablo Berger's 2011 *Blancanieves*, various films by Luis Buñuel, and Carlos Saura's *La caza* (1965); the writings of Eugenio Noel, Leopoldo Alas (Clarín) and Mariano José de Larra, are all included, as well as a chapter dedicated to an analysis of Luis Martín-Santos' *Tiempo de Silencio* (1962), here classified as an anti-bullfighting novel. These intellectuals subvert the national biopolitical discourse and provide alternate metaphors that lead to transformation over time. Surprisingly, Pedro Almodóvar's attitude remains ambiguous in his film *Matador* (1986); while critical of the political discourse of bullfighting, he aestheticizes it to appeal to what he believes is Spanish taste, at a political moment in which Spanish intellectuals and politicians were trying to rehabilitate bullfighting for the young Spanish democracy. While Almodóvar ultimately attributes responsibility for the violence to the Spanish public who, in his view, want to see some good shows, the reality is that most Spaniards are not interested in bullfighting. As Beilin demonstrates, in an analysis of artistic representations of Alaska and Juan Gatti ("La verdad al desnudo: Tauromaquia es cruel") and Albert Riera's photograph "Eau de Toroture," Spanish 'taste' does not overall align with the violence that is aestheticized and sexualized in the biopolitics of bullfighting, nor with the violent masculinity that it promotes. This is further demonstrated in Beilin's discussion of performances by animal rights activists, such as the 2008-2011 "We are the Bull", featured on the book's cover; and the demonstrations in Madrid in 2011 on the International Day of Animal Rights. According to the author, these disruptive performances subvert the hegemonic national archive, and further cultivate an alternative national discourse which, while it may still seem isolated or uneventful, collectively creates an impact, as seen in the Canary Islands' ban on bullfighting in 1991, and Catalonia's in 2010.

The changes in Spanish society's attitude towards bullfighting are also evident in the connection that the public and intellectuals made between bullfighting, animalization, and the War on Terror. By analyzing press debates in Spain from 2004-11, Beilin demonstrates the rhetorical connection between torture (Abu Ghraib), the War on Terror, and bullfighting as a part of society's necropolitics—the animalization of an 'other' allows us to justify inhumane treatment of them, as a part of what is defined at the moment as a greater good. The playwright Juan Mayorga is keenly critical of this discourse in his 2007 play *La paz perpetua*, which was inspired by the infamous Abu Ghraib photographs. The separation that Kant referred to in his original "Perpetual Peace", between ethics and politics, is addressed by Mayorga as a form of structural hypocrisy inherent in our own democratic institutions, for we ultimately justify torture and war against those who are deemed to be like animals, insignificant, dangerous, or "bare life." Mayorga utilizes what Beilin has called a "strong anthropomorphism" in this

play and others, to connect the inhumane treatment of animals to that of marginalized groups—in particular, immigrants and those accused of terrorism, who are in turn animalized in our society.

The search for an alternative biopolitics and a bridging of the human/animal divide coincide with environmentalism, in which we construct not only a new relationship between ourselves and animals, but also humankind and our environment. Human greed and necropolitics have resulted in the destruction of our environment, the consequences of which are demonstrated in various ways in *Beautiful* (Iñárritu 2010), *Nocilla Experience* (Fernández Mallo 2008), and *Lágrimas en la lluvia* (Montero 2011). The tone of these works, which Beilin describes as a “disquieting realism,” communicates an awareness of the destruction being wreaked on the Earth, our bodies, and our psyche. All three works gesture toward the possibility, however elusive, of an ethical coexistence. While *Nocilla Experience’s* dark humor mediates the disquiet by suggesting that we “get extinct with a nocilla smile,” *Lágrimas* suggests that we fight against the doxa, or programmed cultural codes, that lead us to violence and the destruction of animals, the environment, and ultimately ourselves.

In the final chapter, “Debates on GMOs in Spain and Rosa Montero’s *Lágrimas en la lluvia*,” cowritten with Sainath Suryanarayanan, the authors analyze debates on biotechnology in Spain and places them in the context of the history of Spanish discourses on science. Although Spain historically has had a reputation as less scientifically progressive, and even cultivated its own image as ‘different,’ today Spain is the most enthusiastic supporter of biotech in Europe. Ironically, as Beilin and Suryanarayanan argue, citing Jorge Reichmann, this repeats on some levels old patterns of subservience to authority and power, with neoliberal multinational corporations and scientists in their employ taking the place formerly held by the Church and the Monarchy. Just as Bruna Husky, the protagonist of Montero’s novel, must resist her programmed behavior, so too must humans resist and question cultural codes and rhetoric. Against the prevailing enthusiasm for biotech, the authors advocate what they call a “precautionary approach” as part of an ethics of life.

The book encompasses exhaustive analyses of literature, press debates, and theatre; film, performances, and other forms of visual culture; interviews with activists and philosophers, as well as pop songs and ethnography. It is, further, a call to arms for Hispanic studies and the Humanities and Social Sciences in general. Instead of creating entertainments for the elites (personified by the elegant *verónica* of the bullfighter’s cape), we must engage with each other and across disciplines in issues of real significance. While it is true that human civilization is built on dominance of the animal, Beilin suggests that we can change; just as our genes are plastic and malleable, reacting to changes in the environment, so too can we reform our sociopolitical structures by promoting and nurturing an alternative biopolitics that empathizes with all forms of life.