

Beilin, Katarzyna, and William Viestenz, eds. *Ethics of Life. Contemporary Iberian Debates*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2016. Print. 342 pp.

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The essays in this collection explore a variety of Iberian social phenomena and cultural artifacts dealing with ecology, climate change, biotechnology, or the legal and moral status of plant, animal, and human life. The volume is particularly attractive not only because these issues are generally absent in Iberian Studies but also because it questions one of the ideological kernels of Spanish culture, namely its libidinal investment in various forms of “non-modern” spirituality. The editors, Katarzyna Beilin and William Viestenz, remark that, given the inherited conception of Spain as a more natural and spiritual culture than its European, fully industrialized neighbors, it is surprising that Animal Studies and Ecocriticism are still infrequent approaches. But this very spiritualization might be the reason for such infrequency. According to the editors, bullfighting, which epitomizes a discourse on Spanish spiritual difference that goes from Lorca, Alberti and Hemingway all the way to Almodóvar, provides an explanation for this apparent contradiction: “a defensive impulse not to question the anthropocentric vision of the field due to its alliance with bullfighting culture has made Animal Studies approaches unwelcome among Hispanists” (xi). Beilin and Viestenz also connect the culturalist investment in bullfighting to the symbolic power of the Spanish central state. For this reason, the questioning of Spain’s natural and yet anthropocentric culturalism also implies a questioning of Castilian hegemony. The editors, as the title of the volume indicates, embrace the plurinational paradigm of Iberian Studies.

The editors aim to establish horizontal relationships among Iberian cultures, but also argue that “a focus on the entanglements between all forms of life and the material world in fact solicits the creation of new spatial collectivities, composed of a plethora of actants, whose borders are misaligned with the official demarcations of the nation state” (xii). Thus, the essays in the volume present a postdisciplinary paradigm that has room for all types of materials: films, poetry, statistics on abortion, newspaper articles, reproductive rights, political speeches, historical reports, laws on biotechnology, or ecological catastrophes. No single discipline, not even cultural studies, can claim ownership over such an array of materials. Instead, the project is conceived along the lines of Bruno

Latour's actor-network theory as a "series of networks of relations between humans, animals, plants and objects that are all viewed as possessing agency (although not intentionality) and where processes occur as a result of the accumulation of interactions" (xiii). Correspondingly, the diverse inquiries in the volume are less dependent on the familiar methods of ideological critique and discourse analysis, and more engaged in critical practices that mix interpretation and verification, cultural reflection and scientific analysis, descriptive reporting and committed activism. In fact, each essay puts forward a different form of what Donna Haraway calls "situated knowledge, "thus endorsing alliances, limitations and vulnerability against the supposedly objective point of view that "is responsible for hierarchies and the subjugation of life" (xiii). To put it in other terms, the essays do not result from the transcendence of a knowing subject but emanate, or even *immanate*, within the immanent field of debates around life in the Iberian Peninsula.

The book is divided in four main debates. The first part, "Genealogies of Ecological and Animal Rights Movements in Modern and Contemporary Iberia," begins with an article by Carmen Flys-Junquera and Tonia Raquejo that maps out some of the literary and artistic works of the last decades dealing with environmental issues. While the overview is useful and informative, especially the section on land art, we encounter two problematic limitations. First, the works referred are all written in Castilian, and there is no acknowledgment of Iberian differences. In fact, the few references to non-Castilian terms are incorrigibly misspelled: "Ramon Parramon" is spelled "Ramón Parramon" and "Catalunya"/"Catalonia" becomes "Catalunia" (29).

The second matter of concern has to do with one of the possible victims of the postdisciplinary, relational approaches, namely the question of aesthetic value. As an example of ecological poetry, Flys-Junquera and Raquejo cite a poem by José Parreño, "Sutra del Agua," which begins with "sangre de planeta / madre de lo verde / que en las alcobas de los troncos / yaces con el sol / y tu hijo es el aire / que respiramos" 'blood of the planet / mother of greenness / you, who lay with the sun / in the alcove of every log / and your son is the air / that we breathe' (25-26). This poem is a perfect illustration of environmental literature, and for this reason its inclusion in the article is positive and necessary. And yet in cases like this, when literary value is so absent or irrelevant, one cannot help to feel nostalgia for past preoccupations with the canon and the complexities of the aesthetic.

The second essay, written by John H. Trevathan, offers an illuminating and nuanced analysis of the *Nunca Más* movement that emerged in 2002 after the *Prestige* oil spill. Trevathan argues that this movement inaugurated a different type of politics. Against the official policies of the Partido

Popular and the Spanish state, *Nunca Más* politics embraced a transnational, democratic view of Galician identity or *galeguidade* and at the same time were “sensitive to the fragility of human and nonhuman systems” (43). Trevathan shows how the disaffection from a failing modernity did not result in another confirmation of the stereotypical Galician fatalism (“Galicians do not protest; they emigrate,” as the saying goes). Instead, the disaffection produced a “regional identity” based on “an open and porous set of alliances between animals, rocks, humans, umbrellas, suitcases, land and water, all woven together in a heterogeneous cultural object” (49-50).

The next section, “Ecological Crisis and the Neoliberal Appropriation of Public Space,” begins with a comprehensive analysis by Eugenia Afinoguénova on how the ideological construct “quality of life” has functioned as a tool of policy-making in Spain since late Francoism. Afinoguénova traces the relationship between this ideologeme and the implementation of the Keynesian welfare state, but also shows how “quality of life” raised concerns about sustainability and its effects on the environment. But the precious irony highlighted by Afinoguénova is that contemporary arguments against material growth uncannily repeat the arguments that hard-core Falangistas launched against the consumer society in the 1960s.

The next essay, written by Katarzyna Olga Beilin, examines the dystopian tales of Alejandro González Iñárritu’s 2010 film *Biutiful* and of Agustín Fernández Mallo’s 2008 novel *Nocilla Experience*. The rather arbitrary comparison of these two works brings an unexpected effect. While González Iñárritu’s devastated landscapes and tragic stories end up being risible (for instance, he wants to be so deep and meaningful when he establishes an intertextuality between cranes of construction sites and Gaudí’s unfinished Sagrada Família that the movie becomes an embarrassing cliché), Fernández Mallo, by contrast, offers a sarcastic approach to junk consumption that leads to a certain moment of distance and freedom.

In the same section, Matthew I. Feinberg and Susan Larson analyze fascinating forms of urban recycling in post-crisis Madrid. Feinberg and Larson show how, while the production of public space in post-Francoist Spain had depended on state and municipal projects, after 2008 citizens have passionately engaged in “a range of practices that includes things like urban gardens and consumer cooperatives, but also hacklabs, social currency networks, free universities and others” (136). This re-appropriation of city space connects with the ecology of recycling and with what architects Iñaki Ábalos and Juan Herreros along with philosopher José Luis Pardo have suggestively theorized as “a fundamentally un-modern understanding of the relationship between nature and the built environment” (117). Along these lines, the next article, written by Luis I.

Prádanos, analyzes some prominent Spanish scholars who have critiqued the unsustainable model of global capitalism and have put forward alternatives based on “conviviality, voluntary simplicity, slowness, and the reduction of the social metabolism of some populations in order to stay within the ecological limits of the Earth” (144).

The third section, “Iberian Bio-power: Life as a Political Matter,” includes an essay by Pablo de Lora on Spain’s industry on abortion and reproduction tourism. By examining data and specific cases from 1960 to the present, de Lora analyzes the legal and ethical issues as well as the economic interests involved in the women’s rights to reproduction. Paul Begin’s next essay examines different and yet related legal and ethical dilemmas found in Alejandro Amenábar’s famous film *Mar adentro*, which was based on Ramón Sampedro’s struggle to receive assisted suicide and end his terminal illness in the 1990s. Begin points out two interventions in the film that summarize these unsolvable dilemmas: Padre Francisco claims that “Una libertad que elimina la vida no es libertad” ‘A freedom that eliminates life is not freedom’, and Ramón replies, “Y una vida que elimina la libertad tampoco es vida” ‘And a life that eliminates freedom is not a life’ (190).

Sainath Suryanarayanan and Katarzyna Olga Beilin provide another interesting reflection on the development of biotechnology in contemporary Iberia. They explain the ironic and tragic twist that has resulted from Spain’s willingness to adopt pro-biotechnology policies. On the one hand, these policies have promoted the emergence of a high-tech and knowledge-based economy focused on “‘red’ (biomedical), ‘white’ (industrial), and especially ‘green’ (agro-food) applications” (205). This economy has contributed to overcome the country’s traditional backwardness and regressive status vis-à-vis northern Europe. On the other hand, however, these industries have also entailed considerable subordination to multinational corporations, so in many aspects Spain has functioned as a guinea pig and has thus reproduced the marginal position that it aimed to leave behind.

The last section, “Reassembling the Archive through the Concept of Life,” begins with an analysis by Daniel Ares López of the story of Marcos Rodríguez Pantoja, a man who spent his childhood years (from 1953 to 1965) in the Northern Andalusia range of Sierra Morena totally isolated from human contact. In the 1970s, Balearic anthropologist and writer Gabriel Janer Manila wrote a Catalan “testimonio” about Marcos and in 2010 Gerardo Olivares fictionalized his life in the film *Entrelobos*. Ares López examines these two works to explore the blurring of boundaries between culture and nature as well as the non-anthropocentric but social-like relations that Marcos established with the environment.

William Viestenz is the author of the most theoretically sophisticated article in the volume. He examines Salvador Espriu's *La pell de brau* (1960), the famous collection of political poems in which the Catalan poet renames Spain as "Sepharad." Viestenz interprets the multiple figurations of this renaming as part of a general transformation of a "calcified product (*ergon*)" into "a dynamic process (*energeia*)" (258). This transformation entails other correspondences: the conversion of Spain into Iberia, the shift from monolingualism to plurilingualism, or the federalization of the centralist state. The dynamic processes coalesce in the image of the bull raising up as a flag the hide that represents the land, or rather the arena, of Iberia. Thus, "[f]or Espriu, Sepharad can only live eternally if the newfangled flag raised in the first poem ties the polity together around universal principles that the 'bodies naturals' on the ground enunciate through their collective acts" (264). In this respect, Viestenz argues that "Espriu's theorization of the term Sepharad provides a model for harnessing the *energeia* of any word-in-becoming that emphasizes a revolution of relationality" (274), a relationality that blends "the horizontal equality of the diverse peoples of Sepharad" with the intermingling of animal and human, of the beast and the sovereign. At the end of his article, Viestenz also observes that the political application of Espriu's Sephardic Iberianism is probably as implausible today as it was during Francoism. And yet this "political failure" can be transformed into "a pedagogical success" (274) with the implementation of Iberian Studies as theorized by Joan Ramon Resina. One certainly hopes that Viestenz is right, although one cannot fail to notice that, even in a volume with a clear Iberianist spirit such as this one, the terms Iberia and Iberian are almost exclusively used in the articles that deal with non-Castilian products. In the other articles, Spain and Spanish continue to prevail.

The next essay by John Beusterien simply reports the news about animals in Spanish newspapers from 2012 to 2013. (In this article, again, we encounter the regression to classic Hispanism when we read a sentence like: "Although some newspapers in Spain are written in Basque, Catalan, and Galician, this essay focuses on contemporary print media written in Spanish..." [280].) But things become interesting again with Sebastiaan Faber's superb reflection on the contemporary accounting of the victims of the civil war. Faber examines recent wars among historians regarding whether they should limit themselves to establish the facts of past violence or whether they should also seek to pass judgment. While previous generations, exemplified by historian Santos Juliá, tended to "*disavow* any claim from the past on Spain's future" (303), younger generations have felt that the civil war and its dead constituted "a void, unfinished business" (303) and have consequently framed their work in ethical and political terms. After mapping out the

various positions, Faber also argues that the horizon for these debates does not necessarily have to be reconciliation and consensus. Rather, the debates on past violence will be all the more productive if they enable us to detect “the forms of violence operative in the present” (313).

To sum up, *Ethics of Life* includes a productive and stimulating mix of approaches and materials that relate to literary criticism, history, media studies, economics, law, and political science. The interdisciplinary and relational nature of the book is itself a further proof that intellectual work in the age of the Anthropocene lies in collective dialogues that shed light on the infinite complexities of our conjuncture.