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ARTICLES

Torres-Rodríguez, Laura J. "El género de la burocracia: <i>El libro vacío</i> de Josefina Vicens"	2
Andúgar, Rafael. "El retorno del desierto y los espectros del Antropoceno en <i>Blanco Nocturno</i> de Ricardo Piglia"	12
Eslava-Bejarano, Santiago. "Of Cattle and Men: Interspecies Encounters in Ana Paula Maia's <i>De Gados e Homens</i> "	20
Ordóñez Robles, Samanta. "La cara oculta de las masculinidades nuevas en el cine mexicano comercial"	32
Avila Ponce de León, Eric Miguel. "La vida es pornografía igualitaria. <i>Inmaculada o los placeres de la inocencia</i> de Juan García Ponce"	41
Veloria, Elyse. "On the Other Shore: Water in Latin American Illness Narratives"	53

ESSAYS AND INTERVENTIONS

Campanioni, Chris. "Simulation Game: The Pleasures of Disintegration in Sarduy's Theater of Bodies"	62
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CREATIVE WRITING

Ross Laguna, Jen. "Macho Mama"	70
Spooner, T. M. "The Coquí Call"	75
Romero, Galo. "Maria"	78
Ronderos, Clara Eugenia. "Cuando las montañas son paisaje, y otros poemas"	79
Zak, Leila. "Tierra y mar"	82

BOOK REVIEWS

<i>Escrituras geológicas</i> , de Cristina Rivera Garza. Madrid: Vervuert, 2022. 205 páginas. Reviewed by Caro Register	84
<i>Revolutionary Visions: Jewish Life and Politics in Latin American Film</i> , by Stephanie Pridgeon. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021. 194 pages. Reviewed by Claire Solomon	86
<i>Asaltos al escenario: humor, género e historia en el teatro de Sabina Berman</i> , de Priscilla Meléndez. Mexico City: Bonilla Artigas Editores, 2021. 384 páginas. Reviewed by Stuart A. Day	88
<i>The Business of Conquest. Empire, Love, and Law in the Atlantic World</i> , by Nicole D. Legnani. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020. 282 pages. Reviewed by Christian Elguera.....	89

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Of Cattle and Men: Interspecies Encounters in Ana Paula Maia's *De Gados e Homens*

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ABSTRACT: The novel *De Gados e Homens* (2013) takes place in a provincial slaughterhouse situated on a polluted valley. Its author, Ana Paula Maia, depicts the interspecies encounters that take place in this context and suggests possible, albeit troubling, means of acknowledging nonhuman agency. This article examines how Maia's novel *De Gados e Homens* (2014) develops a zoopoetics of the slaughterhouse through the eyes of Edgar Wilson, the slaughterer protagonist. The first section analyzes the polluted valley and the slaughterhouse, which jointly serve as the novel's setting and offer the conditions of possibility for the interspecies encounter. The second section studies how, in that marginal and isolated environment, the slaughterhouse worker's ethical encounter with the cow's face renders him response-able. Through the lenses of Levinas' ethics and the Derridian critique of his anthropocentric limitations, it will be possible to address the ethical complexity of the relationship between the slaughterer and his cows. Finally, the third section examines how Maia's novel suggests bovine agency and communication and explains why the slaughterer is the only character psychologically open to this possibility. This reading of the novel aims to elucidate the relationship between environmental degradation, Edgar's distinctive perspective, and the portrayal and behavior of cows within the narrative.

KEYWORDS: animals, cows, zoopoetics, Ana Paula Maia, De gados e homens, Brazil

RESUMEN: La novela *De ganados y hombres* (2013) transcurre en un matadero de provincias situado en un valle contaminado. Su autora, Ana Paula Maria, retrata los encuentros interespecie que tienen lugar en este contexto y sugiere posibles, aunque inquietantes, formas de reconocer la agencia no humana. Este artículo examina cómo la novela *De Gados e Homens* (2014) de Maia desarrolla una zoopoética del matadero a través de los ojos de Edgar Wilson, el matarife protagonista. La primera sección analiza el valle contaminado y el matadero que sirven como escenario de la novela y ofrecen las condiciones de posibilidad para el encuentro entre especies. La segunda sección estudia cómo, en ese entorno marginal y aislado, el encuentro ético del trabajador del matadero con el rostro de las vacas lo vuelve capaz de dar respuesta (*response-able*). A través de los lentes de la ética de Levinas y la crítica derridiana de sus limitaciones antropocéntricas, será posible abordar la complejidad ética de la relación entre el matarife y sus vacas. Finalmente, la tercera sección examina cómo la novela de Maia sugiere una agencia y comunicación bovinas y explica por qué el matarife es el único personaje psicológicamente abierto a ellas. Esta lectura de la novela tiene como objetivo elucidar la relación entre la degradación ambiental, la perspectiva única de Edgar y la representación y comportamiento de las vacas dentro de la narrativa.

PALABRAS CLAVE: animales, vacas, zoopoética, Ana Paula Maia, De gados e homens, Brasil

RESUMO: O romance *De gados e homens* (2013) se desenvolve num matadouro de províncias situado num vale contaminado. Sua autora, Ana Paula Maia retrata os encontros entre espécies que ocorrem em este contexto e sugere possíveis, embora perturbadoras, maneiras de reconhecer a agência não humana. Este artigo examina como o romance de Maia, "De Gados e Homens" (2014), desenvolve uma zoopoética do matadouro através dos olhos de Edgar Wilson, o protagonista. A primeira seção analisa o vale contaminado e o matadouro, que servem como cenário do romance e oferecem as condições de possibilidade para o encontro entre espécies. A segunda seção estuda como, nesse ambiente marginal e isolado, o encontro ético do trabalhador do matadouro com o rosto da vaca o torna capaz de responder. Através das lentes da ética de Levinas e da crítica derridiana às suas limitações antropocêntricas, será possível abordar a complexidade ética da relação entre o matador e as vacas. Finalmente, a terceira seção examina como o romance de Maia sugere a agência e a comunicação bovina e explica por que o matador é o único personagem psicologicamente aberto a essa possibilidade. Esta leitura abrangente do romance tem como objetivo elucidar a relação entre a degradação ambiental, a perspectiva distinta de Edgar e a representação e comportamento das vacas dentro da narrativa.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: animais, vacas, zoopoética, Ana Paula Maia, *De gados e homens*, Brasil

In an unnamed zoo, a crowd gathers to look at a jaguar. The jaguar's stride 'is the wilderness of freedom,' and his gaze, projected beyond the cage, does not stop to inspect the bars imprisoning him. Ted Hughes, the author of this scene, describes in detail the animal's movements and, according to J.M. Coetzee, he 'shows us that we too can embody animals' (Coetzee, 1999: 53). Thus, Hughes' poem diverges from a literary tradition in which animals appear as figures of human qualities and concepts. According to the Spanish philosopher Marta Tafalla, this tradition is another example of human exploitation of other animals. 'Aesthetic instrumentalization,' as Tafalla calls it, hinders our knowledge and appreciation of nonhuman animals:

We take the external appearance of animals and some aspects of their behavior to depict ideas and human practices as if animals were not more than appearances, suits, and clothes that we may appropriate (...). We dissociate animal appearance from their identity; we use their appearance to turn it into a convenient metaphor, and we end up forgetting how animals are (Tafalla, 2019: 198).¹

Thus, in literature, the names of animals tend to lose their referents to become rhetorical instruments. This procedure approaches what Carol J. Adams calls the 'absent referent': a process of symbolic and material dismemberment enabling humans to consume other animals and forget about their deaths (Adams, 2010: 40). One may ask how literature can overcome such instrumentalization and how it can depict animals without transforming them into mere names and metaphors, signifiers without referent.

De Gados e Homens (2013) by Brazilian writer Ana Paula Maia is, as I intend to show, a novel that does not aesthetically instrumentalize animals. However, like Maia's other novels, it does not claim to have recovered an original referent prior to the animal's symbolic

usage. Nor do Maia's works claim to explore how it feels to embody another animal, as in Hughes' poem. On the contrary, *De Gados e Homens* is the testimony of an encounter with the irreducible singularity of nonhuman animals who, by being unclear and unpredictable, resist being circumscribed to existing discourses. The novel focuses on the slaughterer Edgar Wilson (a recurrent character in Maia's oeuvre), whose daily routine is interrupted by the strange behavior and disappearance of the cows from the slaughterhouse. In this context, he will try to solve the mystery while dealing with the recklessness of his coworker, Zeca, and the arrival of a new slaughterer, Santiago.

Since its publication in 2013, three aspects of *De Gados e Homens* have garnered attention in academia: its literary genre in the context of contemporary Brazilian literature, its portrayal of violence and abjection, and its depiction of interspecies relations. Scholars have praised the novel's reinterpretation of Crime Fiction tropes, particularly in dialogue with authors like Rubem Fonseca. Notable articles on this aspect include 'Sangue e hambúrgueres – o novo realismo e o romance policial na obra *De gados e homens*, de Ana Paula Maia' (2015), 'O abatedouro e os abatidos de Ana Paula Maia: um estudo das representações da violência em *De gados e homens*' (2020), and 'Ana Paula Maia e a literatura de autoria feminina' (2021). More recently, the novel has been read as an example of eco-horror literature, with studies focusing on the relationship between environmental degradation, slow violence, and human exploitation. Articles such as 'Poderes del ecohorror: La novela del matadero en Argentina y Brasil' (2023) and 'Ecocriticism in Brazil: The wastelands of Ana Paula Maia's fictions' (2020) discuss how environmental violence connects to issues of race, class, and species discrimination within the book.

A significant scholarly emphasis has also been placed on human/animal relationships within the slaughterhouse context, especially concerning the ethical stance of Edgar Wilson, the slaughterer

protagonist. From a phenomenological perspective, Andria da Silva (2020) characterized Edgar's standpoint as giving unique access to bovine interiority, while Martín de Mauro (2018) has examined the ethics of the encounter with the gaze of the cows. In this regard, De Mauro (2018) and Lehnen (2020) interpret this encounter as an event that establishes an interspecies relationship based on shared vulnerability and embodiment. Claire Mercier (2021) adheres to these readings and interprets Edgar's stance as a form of interspecies diplomacy unfolding in the abattoir. Finally, regarding the depiction of nonhuman animals, Carol J. Adam's book *The Sexual Politics of Meat* has informed various studies that argue that Maia's novel achieves an unveiling of the absent referent, i.e., it reveals the animals obscured by the industrial complex and concealed by everyday linguistic practices (Neves et Osana, 2021 and Oliveira et Abreu, 2022).

However, a comprehensive reading of *De gados e homens* that elucidates the relationship between environmental degradation, Edgar's distinctive perspective, and the portrayal and behavior of cows within the narrative is yet to be proposed. An ethico-phenomenological approach, informed by an ecocritical perspective, will help understand what emerges in a novel that does not instrumentalize the animal, i.e., the zoopoetics of the novel. In this article, I intend to delineate the contours of this zoopoetics² through an analysis of the slaughterer's standpoint. Firstly, I will illustrate how environmental degradation, industrial exploitation, and moral pollution determine Edgar Wilson's isolation and his approach to the cows. Secondly, I will analyze the moral dimension of the encounter between the protagonist and the cattle. Thirdly, I will explain how the way he performs his task determines the portrayal of cows and a recognition of their agency, i.e., the slaughterer's zoopoetics.

Exclusion and Marginalization in a Rural Slaughterhouse

i. The valley of ruminants

Ana Paula Maia's novels take place in ecosystems in *crisis*. This trope reflects on the history of environmental exploitation in Latin America and subverts a literary tradition that has depicted this region as a utopia of unlimited riches and exuberant landscapes.³ Novels such as *Carvão Animal* (2011) or *Enterre seus Mortos* (2018) occur in environments affected by large-scale mining where characters live in precarious conditions that set them close to animals who survive amidst scarcity. For instance, in *Carvão Animal*, miners coexist with worms living in humid and dark tunnels (Maia, 2011: 76), while in *Enterre seus Mortos*, the protagonist's life as a roadkill collector drives him to follow the vultures that look for dead animals along the highway (Maia, 2018: 26).

De Gados e Homens takes place in the valley of Rio das Moscas, also known as 'Vale dos Ruminantes' (The Valley of the Ruminants), a cattle ranching and meatpacking region where men and women live and die among cows. The fictitious Vale dos Ruminantes represents various provinces of Brazil, a country where the total number

of cows exceeds the total number of human beings by 19 million (Zia et al. 2019). The environmental footprint of 232 million bovines is visible in ecosystems such as the Amazon or the Cerrado, where most cattle ranches and factory farms are located. It is no coincidence that, in recent years, these regions witnessed skyrocketing rates of deforestation and wildfires.⁴ In addition to threatening life on Earth as a whole, this environmental degradation directly disturbs the lives of the inhabitants of meat-producing regions.⁵

Maia's novel reflects on the consequences of the intensive use of resources and land in cattle farming, as well as the proliferation of slaughterhouses required to 'process' cattle. For instance, 'Rio das Moscas'—the river that crosses the valley—is polluted by human and nonhuman waste, blood, and corpses:

Chama-se Rio das Moscas, e, desde que os matadouros cresceram na região conhecida como Vale dos Ruminantes, suas águas limpas encheram-se de sangue. No fundo desse rio está depositado todo tipo de coisa, orgânica e inorgânica. Humana e animal. (Maia, 2013: 28)

Here, the trope *omnia mors aequat*—'death equalizes all'—takes on a unique meaning: instead of the king and the beggar or the young and the old, it is slaughterer and cow who are made equal by death, and that equality is embodied by a putrid river filled with the mixture of human and nonhuman bodies and waste.

In addition to the human-animal mixture in the river, environmental degradation creates other spaces of con-fusion. In the Valley, cattle ranching monopolizes the space for the sole purpose of producing bodies that will soon be dead. By appropriating water sources for use as sewers, the meat industry deprives nearby residents of their means of living (Maia, 2013: 46). Indeed, the Rio das Moscas' death provokes the death of the nearby crops and fishing activities. This circumstance forces the Valley's inhabitants to approach the slaughterhouse like the region's stray dogs and vultures, with whom low-income families compete for the corpses of cows that are not apt for human consumption (Maia, 2013: 108).

Since the abattoirs are responsible for waste dumping and its deleterious consequences to the region (Maia, 2013: 91), they are the source of the *pollution* that spreads over the valley, turning the whole region into an enormous slaughterhouse. However, this pollution is not merely a material phenomenon. Although the term 'pollution' describes physical and environmental degradation since the 17th century (Garrard, 2012: 9), it has a long history of moral connotations. In ancient Greek tragedy, for instance, pollution (*miasma*) referred to a moral stain and corruption caused by a serious crime. The most familiar example of this sense comes from Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. In this tragedy, parricide and incest produce a *miasma* that takes the form of an epidemic, which ends only when Oedipus acknowledges his crimes, tears his eyes out, and flees the city. Indeed, physical contact, including looking into another's eyes and close contact with murderers, were ways of spreading pollution

(Hall, 2010: 303). Therefore, it was necessary to isolate the criminal to save the city from the consequences of his crimes. As we will see in the next section, understanding the slaughterhouse as the source of pollution and the slaughterer as a criminal explains Edgar Wilson's isolation and his self-recognition as a murderer carrying the moral weight of a task no one wants to do.

ii. *The slaughterhouse Touro do Milo*

In a 1929 article in the magazine *Documents*, George Bataille compares the slaughterhouse to a ship carrying cholera, since both revolt decent people and are placed under a stringent quarantine (329). Bataille's reflection is symptomatic of a change in Western societies following the early 19th-century invention of the public abattoir. In most cases, the goal of this institution was to guarantee public health and prevent the proliferation of cholera (Fitzgerald, 2010: 60). For this reason, during the 19th century, public slaughterhouses throughout Europe and America were built outside urban centers. Thus, the fear of the pollution that resulted from slaughtering drove domestic animals out of cities. According to Richard Bulliet, the growing physical and psychological distance between urban dwellers and the animals they eat may be regarded as the beginning of a 'postdomestic society,' that is, a society in which most domestic animals live and die outside the *domus* (Bulliet, 2005: 3).

The slaughterhouse's departure from the city coincided with its accelerated industrialization (Patterson, 2002: 57). In the second half of the 19th century, meat production and packing converged in Chicago's infamous Union Stock Yards. Thanks to the development of the railroad and the expansion to the western frontier, a seemingly unending supply of cattle fed the growing meatpacking district (Patterson, 2002: 57). Paradoxically, the industry's development came with an ever-growing post-domestic sensitivity towards animal suffering. While meat consumption increased worldwide, a burgeoning movement started denouncing animal exploitation. According to Bulliet, postdomestic societies demand that animal death be concealed to ease anxiety about nonhuman suffering while maintaining the growing demand for its products. This kind of paradoxical sensitivity explains how the moral sense of *pollution* remains present in the proscription of slaughterhouses from cities: these places threaten the moral integrity of citizens.

Although postdomesticity emerges at different rates in different parts of the world, Maia's novel might be said to take place in a postdomestic context, in which the deaths of cows are far removed from cities and from the gaze of others. In this context of radical separation, the occasional encounters between those who eat cows and those who kill them reveal the postdomestic paradox. In the novel, Edgar is met by a group of college students on a field trip at the slaughterhouse. The contrast between him and them is immediately apparent. Inside the abattoir's stunning room, Edgar faces the familiar cows he has previously met in the field, remembers their spots, and reflects on the arbitrariness of the distinction between

humans and other animals 'em lugares onde o sangue se mistura ao solo e à água' (Maia 55). His task is described as a ritual: before stunning a cow, Edgar draws a white cross on her forehead, a gesture reminiscent of the ash cross with which Catholics are marked at the start of Lent (Maia, 2013: 9). However, none of this is visible from outside the stunning room, the slaughterhouse, and the meatpacking region.

When Edgar takes a bathroom break, a student confronts him with nervous questions: 'Como é matar boi o dia inteiro? O senhor não acha que isso é assassinato? O senhor não acha que sacrificar esses animais é crime?' (Maia, 2013: 57). First, he notices the young woman's *leather* shoes, an illustration of the postdomestic tension between moral sensitivity and animal consumption. After answering her questions in the affirmative, recognizing himself as a murderer, the student insists on asking if he is not ashamed. Confronted for the first time, Edgar understands that the reason for his task lies not in the slaughterhouse but in the cities, where people consume the *filés* he will never taste (Maia, 2013: 59). In response, he offers her his mace and asks if she knows where the meat she eats comes from. The scene ends with the woman's tears and the vomit of one of her classmates. From the beginning of this passage, the distance separating the students from the abattoir is clear. Their moral and physical aversion to this place corresponds to the double sense of pollution emanating from it.

In addition to separating most human beings from the animals they consume, the slaughterhouse also isolates its workers from the human community, thereby dehumanizing them.⁶ Gabriel Giorgi (2014) suggests that something similar occurs in literary depictions of slaughterhouses. According to him, the *slaughterhouses of culture* (i.e., slaughterhouses portrayed in literature) have served two main rhetorical purposes. On the one hand, they have served to depict stages of barbaric pre-modern politics and, on the other, as instances of the violence inherent in modern capitalism. In the first case, the animal is portrayed as 'the irrational and stupidly cruel Derridean beast that threatens civil order, law, and civilizational pedagogies; as the barbarian, the animal with a human form' (Giorgi, 2014: 133). In the second, the animal and its death become a *figure* to 'draw attention to work under capitalist conditions and comment on the nature of commodification' (Giorgi, 2014: 135). Thus, according to Giorgi, the animals in the slaughterhouses of culture often *illustrate* or *represent* something else.

Maia's slaughterhouse 'Touro do Milo' does portray the dehumanization of workers. The novel begins with the *bellowing* (os berros) of Don Milo, the rancher and slaughterhouse owner, who 'conclui um telefonema aos berros, já que desde cedo aprendeu a berrar, quando solto no pasto, ainda bem menino, disputava com o bezerro a teta da vaca' (Maia, 2013: 7). Similar examples of animalization appear throughout the novel. Helmuth, the butcher, performs his work with 'olhos de peixe morto' (Maia, 2013: 18). Bronco Gil, the foreman, is partially devoured by vultures after a car accident (Maia, 2013: 34) and, when faced with the enigma of the miss-

ing cows, he is described as 'tão desorientado quanto a vaca antes de morrer' (Maia, 2013: 53). Just before he is hit by one of Bronco's arrows, the slaughterer Santiago behaves like a beast (Maia, 2013: 69). These and other comparisons reassert the dehumanization of slaughterhouse workers. However, there is no identifiable pattern in these similes that would enable an encompassing reading of the slaughterhouse as an allegory of some social or political human conflict; as one could identify it in novels such as Esteban Echeverría's *El matadero* or Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, in which it is possible to find a distribution of animal metaphors that permits interpreting animals as figures representing political factions or human groups.

Rather than instrumentalizing animals to denounce human sufferings, Maia's characterizations of human workers illustrate how a degraded environment creates a zone of abjection, as Lehnen calls it, where the ontological division between human and nonhuman mingles (Lehnen, 2020: 29). Thus, even though the novel denounces labor exploitation and the workers' dehumanization, Giorgi's previous description of the two rhetorical uses of the slaughterhouse of culture does not entirely fit Maia's novel. However, he recognizes that there are other texts 'that present the animal as an irreducible dimension to previous orders' (Giorgi, 2014: 138). Such texts situate animals on the borderline between life and death, a place of transition in which their figure becomes a specter, and their death turns contagious, all without serving just as an instrument for representation. Beyond similes, *De Gados e Homens* situates the reader in the unique standpoint of a marginalized individual isolated in the stunning room of a provincial slaughterhouse.⁷ There, he sees cows like no one else in the novel. While the consumers deal with scattered remains or well-packed burgers, his coworkers deal with live cattle or dead bodies. Few of them witness the passage from one state to the other. From Edgar's point of view, the novel proposes a zoopoetics where cows come into view without serving as mere figures, metaphors, or images.

Encounters in the Slaughterhouse

i. The cattle stunner's task

Edgar Wilson has learned from experience that few people can undertake the task of killing. In addition to the expertise and strength required to put down an animal weighing hundreds of pounds, it is also necessary to have the spiritual disposition to recognize one's role in their transit towards death. This realization leads Edgar to zealously embrace his job even to the point of killing the new slaughterhouse stunner, Zeca, because of his reluctance to stun the cows compassionately (Maia, 2013: 17). The nature of the slaughterer's task exacerbates the protagonist's isolation, who comes to acknowledge his job as a sacrifice. To kill cows, Edgar must renounce his own innocence, recognizing himself as a murderer whose task enables the willful ignorance of those who do not want to know how meat arrives on their plates. Before answering the student's questions, the narrator states that Edgar 'acredita que eles [as va-

cas] possuem uma [alma] e que ele dará conta de cada uma delas quando morrer. *De cada quinhentos uma alma*' (Maia, 2013: 59, my emphasis). This thought evokes God's command to Moses in the Book of Numbers 31:28. There, the Jews were instructed to set aside one out of every five hundred cows in order to purify the loot taken from the Midianites. In this case, the slaughterer's soul is set aside to atone for all the slaughtered animals since nobody else will do it for him.

The collapse of the human/animal divide in the slaughterhouse of culture takes a different meaning for Edgar since he is the only worker aware of his closeness to the cows he stuns. His proximity, and Edgar's ability to recognize the gaze and corporeality of the cows, enables a physical bond and harmony: 'Edgar sente-se tão afinado com os ruminantes, com seus olhares insondáveis e a vibração do sangue em suas correntes sanguíneas, que às vezes se perde em sua consciência ao questionar quem é o homem e quem é o ruminante.' (Maia 55). This harmony does not presuppose acknowledging a list of shared attributes or capacities. On the contrary, that recognition is possible because Edgar and the cows share a material condition: the vibration of blood in their veins (Lehnen, 2020: 31).

Aside from physical proximity, Edgar's harmony with the cows may be described as spiritual too: both are *scapegoats* who must sacrifice themselves for others. Just like the cows of the modern meat industry, the slaughterer's sacrifice in the novel is neither soteriological nor redemptive, nor does it give access to a purer milieu like a temple.⁸ It is not soteriological because Edgar knows that his soul will not be saved through the sacrifice (Maia, 2013: 15). It is not redemptive either since it does not clean the sins of those who eat meat, as both killers and consumers are 'homens de sangue' (Maia, 2013: 99). Finally, the sacrifice does not grant access to a purer milieu because shedding blood is Edgar's destiny. At the end of the novel, the narrator says:

Sabe que seus dias de predador continuarão, e que derramar sangue ainda será seu meio de sobrevivência. É o que sabe fazer. Talvez um dia encontre outro trabalho, um que seja limpo. Por enquanto, seguirá abatendo porcos; impuro e moralmente aceitável, é assim que ele se sente. Não há ninguém que o impeça, pois homens como ele são poucos, que são homens para matar. (Maia, 2013: 99).

Edgar's sacrifice will not bring future redemption or an eternal afterlife. Thus, his senseless and meaningless sacrifice sets him closer to the cows, who give up their lives without the promise of retribution or salvation.

Still, Edgar interprets his task as a spiritual mission that only he can accomplish because he can feel compassion. This understanding explains his disagreement with a discourse that quantifies and rationalizes death. It would be easy to think about his ability as a measurable skill to be mechanized and easily done by others. How-

ever, Edgar's interpretation of his own work transcends this simple analysis. In the first chapter of the novel, a contrast emerges between the narrator's description of the 'occult science' of handling cattle and Edgar's understanding of that task:

Se a pancada na frente for muito forte, o animal morre e a carne endurece. Se o animal sentir medo, o nível de pH no sangue é elevado, o que deixa a carne com um gosto ruim. Alguns abatedores não se importam. O que Edgar Wilson faz é encomendar a alma de cada animal que abate e fazê-lo dormir antes de ser degolado. Não sente orgulho do trabalho que executa, mas se alguém deve fazê-lo que seja ele, que tem piedade dos irracionais (Maia, 2013: 11).

The meat industry quantifies the precision and value of Edgar's work: the standardized pH levels and the meat's stiffness account for the quality of his labor. However, Edgar's conception of his work contrasts with this technical approach since he commends the soul of each animal before killing them. In his view, compassion and the recognition of each animal's individuality are the features of his 'occult science.' This attitude partially explains Edgar's unique perspective throughout the novel⁹.

Finally, to understand how Edgar avoids instrumentalizing and objectifying the animals he stuns, seeing the cows as more than numbers or pieces of meat, we must observe his position in the long production line. Edgar is located where the transubstantiation that makes the whole meat industry possible occurs: the point at which the living animal becomes meat. The whole production line depends on the transformation of the individual—whose blood trembles like that of the slaughterer—into meat—that numberless, uncountable substance deprived of any identity. However, Edgar's crucial position is hidden from sight: both from the consumers and the slaughterhouse workers. While the former see neither the life nor the death of the animal, the latter see either living animals or corpses. In contrast, Edgar is aware of each step a cow must pass from the corral to the plate. This is why he cannot ignore the origin of the meat he consumes the first time he eats a hamburger: 'Com os colegas comem toda a caixa, admirados. Assim, redondo e temperado, nem parece ter sido um boi. Não se pode vislumbrar o horror desmedido que há por trás de algo tão saboroso e delicado' (Maia, 2013: 17).

ii. *The inscrutable gaze of a ruminant*

From the start of the novel, Edgar sees cows without projecting a totalizing knowledge on them that aims to grasp or appropriate them. Instead, in the lonely stunning room of the slaughterhouse, he encounters the cow's eyes, which reflect an inapprehensible infinity:

Edgar Wilson mantém seu pensamento fixo na escuridão

dos olhos dos ruminantes, esforçando-se para desenhar um leve traço que o intente a desvendá-los. Nem todo o esforço da sua imaginação é capaz de lançar luz nas trevas; nem naquelas produzidas por olhos insondáveis, nem na própria treva que encobre a sua maldade (Maia, 2013: 15).

The darkness and impenetrability of the cow's eyes point to an infinity that resists the grasp. The recognition of the animal face and the infinity of its gaze recall Emmanuel Levinas' understanding of the encounter with the face of the Other as the fundamental experience that is the basis of all ethical encounters.¹⁰ Following Jacques Derrida's reading of Levinas, one may argue that this notion of the Other as containing an infinity that confronts the subject must include other animals. Indeed, in *The Animal that Therefore I Am*, Derrida questions the absence of nonhuman animals in Levinas' ethics of the face and argues that establishing a species frontier to limit the scope of the notion of the 'Other' risks the whole Levinasian project, since the notion of radical Otherness containing an ungraspable infinity would be, in fact, finite because it would be limited to the human species (Derrida, 2008: 107-109).

Thus, rather than anthropomorphizing the animal, extending Levinas' notions of the face and the Other to include nonhuman animals completes his philosophical project of developing an ethics of alterity. For instance, in his treatment of this subject in *Totality and Infinity* (1971), we may recognize a description resonating with Maia's portrayal of the encounters between Edgar and the cattle. According to Levinas, the inapprehensible quality of the Other's face offers a type of resistance. In that resistance, the Other does not oppose a comparable force. Instead, they oppose the infinity of their transcendence, which one may recognize in the unpredictability of their reactions, i.e., their ability to say 'no:'

But he [*sic*] can oppose to me a struggle, that is, oppose to the force that strikes him [*sic*] not a force of resistance, but the very *unforeseeableness* of his [*sic*] reaction. [...] The infinite paralyzes power by its infinite resistance to murder, which, firm and insurmountable, gleams in the face of the Other, in the total nudity of his defenseless eyes, in the nudity of the absolute openness of the Transcendent. There is here a relation not with a very great resistance, but with something absolutely *other*: the resistance of what has not resistance—the ethical resistance. (Levinas, 1971: 199)

As a cattle stunner, Edgar Wilson experiences the ethical encounter with the face of the Other. His inability to decipher the eyes of the cows he stuns confronts him with his own finitude: the only thing he can see in the cows' eyes is his own reflection (Maia, 2013: 50); beyond that limit, everything in their gaze remains unfathomable, *insondável* (Maia, 2013: 28). In this context, the infinite resistance

to murder that Levinas posits does not mean that the Other can escape from a violent death. Rather, it means that, in their appearance, the Other demonstrates their immeasurable transcendence. Levinas admits that it is possible to kill the Other but that, in so doing, one cannot dominate the Other. Murder is the embodiment of a complete annihilation that implies an absolute renunciation of comprehension (Levinas, 1971: 212). In the novel, this renunciation appears as the absence of any image, infinity, or reflection in the eyes of a dead cow:

Os olhos dela estão arregalados, petrificados. Ele abaixa e toca-a gentilmente na testa partida, fazendo o sinal da cruz. Não encontra o seu reflexo nos olhos do ruminante. Desta vez, ele não estava lá. (Maia, 2013: 52)

Recognizing the indecipherable infinity of the living cows' gaze puts Edgar in a difficult position: By killing them, he does not dominate them or see them as objects outside his moral community. Consequently, the darkness he sees not only fills the cows' inscrutable gaze but is reflected also in his own wickedness (Maia, 2013: 15). The unsolicited appearance of the Other creates a paradoxical bond: by communicating their vulnerability, the Other situates us in the position of a potential murderer while simultaneously establishing the fundamental ethical mandate, 'thou shalt not kill' (Levinas, 1971: 212).

Edgar's encounters with the cows lead to the recognition of his *responsibility* for their deaths (Maia, 2013: 59). This *responsibility* does not only mean that he recognizes himself as the cause of the cows' deaths and as the one who must account for their souls. Responsibility also means that, by recognizing the cows as an Other, he is *response-able*, in that he is able to respond. As will be argued in the next section, his ability to respond in interspecies encounters does not imply that, in his actions, Edgar seeks the cows' wellbeing. On the contrary, Edgar's *response-ability* reveals itself through his actions when faced with the cows' unpredictable behavior. In this sense, response-ability in the novel differs from how it is presented in Donna Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble*. Edgar and the cows instantiate neither a 'collective knowing and doing' nor a 'sympoietic arrangement' proper to an ecological assemblage (Haraway, 2015: 34, 58). In Maia's novel, the protagonist can respond because he approaches the cows' behavior from a non-anthropocentric standpoint. That standpoint enables him to see the animals without imposing a pre-established conceptual structure that pretends to explain all their behavior antecedently. However, this approach, sparked by a close encounter, does not mean that, in the interaction, the participants make each other capable of mutual understanding.

The following section will offer two examples of how Edgar's ability to respond is grounded in his situated understanding of cattle. The first one is his multisensory engagement with other animals, described in an encounter that exceeds the limited powers of the human sense of sight. The second is his willingness to recognize cow agency, which, in the novel, emerges as an unpredictable re-

sistance. Both cases represent Edgar's non-anthropocentric standpoint, which contrasts with his coworkers' understanding of cattle and emanates from his encounter with the bovine faces.

A More Than Human Perspective

Being unable to dissipate the darkness in the cows' eyes reaffirms Edgar's finitude and the limits of his sight in more-than-human interactions. Thanks to this experience, Edgar responds to two problems that his colleagues cannot. First, he distinguishes a group of cows from Israel mixed in with an imported Lebanese herd. Second, he understands that the seemingly inexplicable disappearance of some of the cows is not the result of a robbery or the work of a predator. In both cases, anthropocentric perspectives are insufficient in the interaction with other animals.

i. A dialogue between the slaughterer and the cows

When a new herd arrives at the abattoir, the workers face an impossible task: differentiating two groups of seemingly identical cows—some coming from Lebanon and others from Israel—which have become mixed together. From the beginning of the scene, the narrator suggests the limits of the human sense of sight: 'o espaço é pequeno para tantas cabeças de gado, e olhando à distância não é possível distinguir absolutamente nada dentro da escuridão. Só o cheiro e os mugidos é que determinam o conteúdo do veículo' (Maia, 2013: 38). In the overcrowded truck, the cows' silhouettes blur together: they already resemble the shapeless entity that they will become as meat. Their amorphous presence denotes the spectral nature of animals in transit towards death (Giorgi, 2014: 160).

Once the truck has been unloaded, Don Milo, the slaughterhouse owner, 'contraí o rosto, como se desse jeito, fazendo careta, conseguisse obter algum esclarecimento' (Maia, 2013: 38). Unless he can separate the intruding cows from the rest of the herd, he runs the risk of upsetting his Lebanese clients, since he thinks they will recognize the Israeli cows by their taste. This puzzle demonstrates the slaughterhouse workers' limited abilities, so Don Milo turns to Edgar for help (Maia, 2013: 40). At first, Edgar does not see anything. Not only are the Lebanese and the Israeli cows indistinguishable, but 'não era possível distinguir coisa alguma, nem mesmo as vacas locais das vacas estrangeiras' (Maia, 2013: 42). Soon, Edgar realizes that it is futile to look for a specific difference that could separate the two groups. The impossibility of establishing a new taxonomy, distinguishing a fictitious *Bos Taurus Israelensis* from a *Bos Taurus Libanensis*, demonstrates the collapse of human antagonisms when they are applied to more-than-human realms. However, the attitudes and behavior of other characters suggest otherwise. Throughout the scene, the human onlookers emphasize the cows' nationality, describe the Israeli ones as invasive, and compare the fence that should have separated both herds to the border between Lebanon and Israel (Maia, 2013: 41). However, to claim

that, in this scene, 'economic, religious and cultural antagonisms turn animal,' as Martín de Mauro suggests (2018: 109), would ignore the real animals hiding them behind human concepts. This is the mistake of the slaughterhouse workers, who describe the situation as the mixture of two groups of 'vacas inimigas' (Maia, 2013: 40). In contrast to them, Edgar does not attempt to recognize the cows using human categories from the seemingly impartial distance enabled by sight. Instead, he engages with the herd in a multisensory way, walking among the cows and feeling them (Maia, 2013: 42). By abandoning the uniquely human sensory hierarchy that identifies sight and hearing as the privileged ways of access to reality (Tafalla, 2019: 69), Edgar renounces the distance that such hierarchy establishes. Thus, he accomplishes an effective way of communicating with the cows.

In this scene, communication is not grounded in a common language, understood as a set of syntactic rules that enable an infinite combination of semantic units that preexist the communicative encounter. In other words, the interspecies communication described in the novel does not imply that Edgar can access a bovine language whose structure and content remain unknown to the rest of the slaughterhouse workers. Instead, to understand Edgar's communicative interactions with cows, we must first understand why Edgar does not see them as mere objects or instances of an abstract entity called *Bos Taurus Taurus*. Because of his encounter with the cow's face, Edgar has become *response-able*: he has become capable of responding and, more importantly for the novel, of recognizing the cows' responses. So, one may ask, how can the cattle stunner communicate with such different and unpredictable animals?

In her book *When Animals Speak: Toward an Interspecies Democracy* (2019), the philosopher Eva Meijer investigates how nonhuman languages and interspecies communication can be understood from a political perspective. Meijer refutes the idea that human language is the paradigm according to which all other instances of language must be studied. She calls for a reconceptualization of language from a non-anthropocentric perspective sensitive to the diverse dimensions of animal communication. To do this, Meijer employs Ludwig Wittgenstein's concept of *language games*. According to Wittgenstein, understanding language is primarily achieved by paying attention to how it works, rather than learning its semantic definitions and syntactic rules in the abstract. This approach is crucial to the study of nonhuman languages, because a situated conception of language is consistent with means of communication that gain sense only after their contexts have been understood:

Instead of locating meaning in the relation between mind and world, Wittgenstein views language as essentially a public practice. He argues that meaning originates from the relation between language and world. Meaning is not a prefabricated entity that we can give or withhold from others, nor is it a property of words or minds; it is essen-

tially social and tied to interactions between living beings (Meijer, 2019: 47).

To comprehend a particular nonhuman language, one does not need to postulate a fixed definition of language, nor a definite set of discrete units of meaning (such as words) that may be ordered according to a particular syntax. In this view, meaning is not given beforehand: it is achieved through interaction. Thus, to comprehend communication, one should know the context in which the language game takes place and understand what forms of life participate in it.

Edgar's interaction with the cows takes place in the context of a corral, in which two different groups of animals have been forced to live together after being transported for thousands of miles. Edgar approaches the cows, feels them, and interacts with them. Having lived among them for a long time, he has closely observed that they congregate under trees, always facing north (Maia, 2013: 22). The cows coming from Lebanon and from Israel are not only visually indiscernible, but also, as gregarious ruminants, they seek to group together with their own. This understanding enables Edgar to posit a question in terms that a gregarious ruminant may respond to:

Edgar Wilson se aproxima e bate as mãos na tentativa de dispersá-las, mas o quarteto se mantém inabalável. Busca outras vacas para o convívio do quarteto. Estranha a seletividade do gado. As vacas em maior grupo mitem com força e se recusam a aproximar-se das outras. (Maia, 2013: 42).

To the question posed with open hands and arms, the cows of the bigger group respond by staying put and mooing. Thus, Edgar posits a question and understands the responses of the cows, who stay apart from the four coming from Israel. Consequently, the narrator describes him as someone who 'sabe escutar em silêncio, até mesmo quando os outros tão somente suspiram ou resfolegam' (Maia, 2013: 42). This ability depends on recognizing the Other and their way of living. His knowledge and close interaction with the animals enable Edgar to recognize which cows do not belong to the original herd. However, close attention to the cow's ways of being and responses does not, on its own, establish a caring relationship. On the contrary, distinguishing the mixed groups of cows enables their more efficient exploitation. In this sense, the stunner's non-anthropocentric perspective serves eminently anthropocentric goals and reaffirms his paradoxical position in the novel.

ii. *Escaping as agency and resistance*

In the end, Edgar's perspective enables him to unravel the central enigma of the novel: the disappearance of entire herds from the slaughterhouse. Edgar's recognition of the cow's behavior as a form of agency and resistance enables him to untangle the mystery. Ac-

ording to Eva Meijer, understanding animal resistance requires recognizing (i) species-specific behaviors and (ii) the context of the resistance (Meijer, 2019: 187). Following Levinas' ethics of alterity, a third condition should be considered: openness to the unpredictability of individual animal behavior. Edgar's approach to the cows' behavior involves all three conditions, which, in turn, inform a zoopoetics of the slaughterhouse, a way of portraying cows that reflects on the limits of human epistemology and ethics in more-than-human encounters.

Before anyone else, Edgar notices that some of the cows have stopped facing north when grazing (Maia, 2013: 48). Throughout the novel, he considered this behavior a 'code of conduct' and interpreted its abandonment as a bad omen:

Os bovinos, todos eles, quando pastam se orientam para o norte, pois são capazes de sentir o campo magnético terrestre. Poucos sabem o motivo disso, mas os que lidam com os bovinos diariamente sabem que eles mantêm um código de comportamento e que permanecem na mesma direção ao pastar. Esse equilíbrio não se vê nos homens, em nenhum deles (Maia, 2013: 22).

In this passage, as in the one discussing the pH level of the meat, the narrator's perspective contrasts with that of the protagonist. While the narrator explains the cow's behavior in terms of the influence of the magnetic fields, Edgar conceives it as 'a code of conduct.' This interpretation opens the possibility of thinking about a bovine culture present in everyday practices that may be transmitted from generation to generation. The change of this code of conduct is an early warning for Edgar, who anticipates the disaster in the slaughterhouse (Maia, 2013: 49).

Soon after, Edgar and Bronco Gil witness the novel's first instance of nonhuman resistance. One of the cows throws herself towards the barbed wire, escapes from her enclosure, and charges one of the slaughterhouse walls head-first (Maia, 2013: 51). This behavior challenges previous ideas and beliefs about cows. It leads Bronco Gil to suspect that there is a nearby predator, although there is no evidence to support his hypothesis. In the rest of the novel, the slaughterhouse workers will insist on finding the predator because that is the only explanation that fits with their beliefs about cows. For instance, while arguing with his colleagues about the strange occurrences in the abattoir, Vladimir asks: 'Como a vaca foi endoi-dar assim? Elas ficam aí confinadas, comendo e bebendo... só esperando morrer' (Maia, 2013: 60). In the context of a narrative that portrays domestication as a covenant in which animals offer their lives in exchange for food and safety, it is impossible to think that cows may flee their enclosures. The workers' insistence on looking for a predator is the result of reducing nonhuman animal complex conduct to a fixed narrative; this, in turn, hinders the recognition of nonhuman agency in other animals *qua* individuals. Edgar Wilson, meanwhile, does not confront his colleagues' knowledge with his

own reading of the cows' actions. On the contrary, he remains uncertain, silently attesting to the seeming incomprehensibility of the cows' actions.

When asked about what has happened in the slaughterhouse, Edgar simply relates what he saw without hypothesizing any explanation: the cow died because she threw herself at the walls without being chased by a predator (Maia, 2013: 66). Something similar happens when an entire herd disappears and is found at the bottom of a nearby precipice. When Bronco Gil claims that 'Vacac não se atiram de precipícios' (Maia, 2013: 89), Edgar answers him: 'Nem rios salgam de um dia pro outro. Estamos só a um quilômetro do mata-douro. Elas andaram até aqui' (Maia, 2013: 90). Edgar's response not only recognizes the possibility that the cows jumped from the cliff. By comparing the salty river with the cows' deaths, Edgar suggests that both events have a common cause. The context of environmental degradation allows him to make sense of the bovines' escape.

Even if the cows remain inscrutable to Edgar, interspecies communication and the context of the novel attest to his identification with them. Indeed, at the end of the novel, when a second herd breaks the fence to escape, Edgar foresees where they will end up because it is the same place where he would go if he were in their position (95). By identifying with the cows, the cattle stunner recognizes animal agency. For Edgar, cows do not fall off precipices out of clumsiness, instinct, or any other external condition. Instead, by saying that he would go to the same place if he were in their position, Edgar recognizes the cows' fall as the product of a complex psyche. In this sense, he contradicts the common tendency to explain away nonhuman agency as incidental responses to external stimuli, even when similar human behaviors are read as purposeful actions (Meijer, 2019: 186). Following Meijer's analysis, we see how the cattle stunner can comprehend the cows' agency and resistance based on his intimate knowledge of their behavior and context.

Additionally, as we have said, Edgar concedes that cows may act unpredictably. By interrupting habits, animals appear as individuals who transgress the purposes laid out for them by others. By refusing to carry out their predefined tasks, animals demonstrate agency²¹. In Maia's novel, animals exhibit their capacity to resist when they stop being passive production units in an enclosed field and charge at the barbed wire, the control device specifically designed to enclose them (Netz, 2009: 39). However, to acknowledge their individuality, it is not enough to reject the conception of animals as tools. A disposition to interpret animal conduct in its original context, unconstrained by pre-established discourses, is also necessary. Edgar's readiness to perform such an interpretation is the result of his previous experience with cattle. Cows facing the slaughterer are not expected to look back at him. Yet, when they do so, their presence becomes immeasurable. In the novel, acknowledging that infinitude in the stunning room establishes the common ground for an encounter that leads to the cattle stunner's recognition and response-ability.

Conclusions

Throughout this article, I have shown how the protagonist in Ana Paula Maia's novel *De Gados e Homens* conceives of animals. Through the eyes of the slaughterhouse worker, Maia develops a zoopoetics beyond the two modes of animal literature posited by Coetzee (i.e., a literature that instrumentalizes animals vs. one that explores their inner lives). In the novel, she offers a third possibility: that of a literature that acknowledges nonhuman agency while reflecting on its unfathomable alterity. A study of the environment and the protagonist's work enables an understanding of the paradoxical position of one capable of communicating with animals while simultaneously exploiting them. The protagonist's identification of cows as agents who resist their exploitation does not imply that he recognizes them as equals: on the one hand, their subjectiv-

ity is infinite and incomprehensible; on the other, they are still exploited. However, he does not conceive of them as objects beyond the scope of moral consideration either. Thus, the novel presents a man in a dilemma that perhaps is also our own.

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NOTES

¹All Spanish translations in this article are my own.

²Here, I follow Kári Driscoll and Eva Hoffmann's conceptualization of zoopoetics as a way of 'listening otherwise' to the animal to recover what has been repressed and forgotten. Thus, a zoopoetic approach is more than simply identifying animals within texts. It is the study of a poetic thinking that engages with animals in a way that questions textuality, materiality, and the politics and aesthetics of representation. (Driscoll et Hoffman 15).

³In her article on Ana Paula Maia's oeuvre, Leila Lehnen (2020) mentions how this narrative of abundance persists in current political discourses in the region. For instance, she explains how Jair Bolsonaro, former president of Brazil, built his political agenda of exploiting the Amazon on this type of discourse (24).

⁴The Cerrado region has lost more than 46% of its original cover due to illegal deforestation linked to cattle ranching and soy production (Rodrigues et al., 2022: 6807), while the Amazon has lost 54.2 million hectares in the last 20 years due to similar causes (Zanon, 2023).

⁵For instance, meat production is one of the most significant sources of water pollution globally because of the pathogens, hormones, residues of antibiotics in cattle manure, and the decomposing organic matter of dead animals (Mateo-Sagasta et al. 10).

⁶In addition to the sanitary justification, the slaughterhouse serves to (re)produce human identity as something distinguishable from nonhuman animals. In this sense, the slaughterhouse would be another instance of what Giorgio Agamben has called the 'anthropological machine': a group of devices, strategies, and politics that aim to constantly produce the *human*. In the case of the slaughterhouse, the anthropological machine would function just as the machine of the moderns described in *The Open*: 'it functions by excluding as not (yet) human an already human being from itself, that is, by animalizing the human, by isolating the nonhuman within the human' (Agamben 37).

⁷In *Maltrato animal, sufrimiento humano*, Mauricio García Pereira comments on the spatial arrangement of the abattoir based on his own experience as a slaughterer. He explains how most slaughterhouses are designed as an 'L' to set apart the stunning and bleeding of the cattle from the rest of the stages of the process (García Pereira, 2019: 5).

⁸For the different meanings of sacrifice in the Judeo-Christian tradition, see J.W. Rogerson's 'What Was the Meaning of Animal Sacrifice' (1998)

⁹Following Baptiste Morizot, Claire Mercier (2021) reads Edgar as a diplomat of sorts mediating between the capitalist necropolitics and an ethics of consideration. While this reading accounts for the unique stance of the character in the novel; one may question if the concept of diplomacy fits the unequal context of a slaughterhouse and if Morizot's proposal of an interspecies diplomacy applies to relationships between humans and domesticated animals (given that his studies deal mainly with wolves). In this regard, it would be relevant to take into consideration the political distinctions proposed by Kymlicka and Donaldson in *Zoopolis* (2014).

¹⁰Martín de Mauro Rukovsky reads this scene of Maia's novel as proof of the impossibility of recognizing a *face* in the animal since the cow's eyes are dark and unfathomable (de Mauro 192). However, this abysmal impenetrability may support a reading of the passage as an encounter between the stunner and the *transcendent* face of the cow. Indeed, indecipherability is one of the attributes that make the cow transcendent, that is, external to the stunner and eluding any attempt to subject her to a comprehensive knowledge (Bergo).

¹¹In his article 'Animals are part of the working class: a challenge to labor history,' Jason Hribal studies the place of animal resistance in the emergence of modern capitalism. In the cases he cites, humans who handle animals acknowledge the animals' ways of resisting (Hribal 37). In that context, scaping and refusing to work are considered active ways of saying 'no' and showing agency.

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