

Food Ethics in the Work of Astrid Cabral¹

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Grounding Literature

In the poem “Na Vizinhança das Estrelas” (“In the Vicinity of the Stars”) from the collection *Visgo da Terra* (*Slime of the Earth*, 1986) Brazilian writer Astrid Cabral (1936-) goes back to a telling interaction between her grandfather and her childhood self. Sitting on a garden bench, the grandfather watched the sunset every afternoon and then turned to the stars in the evening sky: ““Olhe a Ursa Maior, a Ursa Menor”” (*Déu* 214; ““Look at the Great Bear, the Little Bear””), he told his granddaughter.² But the little girl did not recognize the constellations: “(Tropical, eu pensava em Onça. / Ursa era pura abstração polar)” (Idem; “(Tropical, I thought about the Jaguar. / A Bear was a pure polar abstraction”). Immersed in the environment of her native Manaus, located at the heart of the Brazilian Amazon, the child had no concrete experience of the bears that lend the constellations their names and could only think of the jaguar, a feared, omnipresent animal in the rainforest and its mythology. Uninterested in the distant heavens, she would ask, “Vovô, que flor será aquela?,” but she was met with “[s]ilêncio. Ele não respondia” (Idem; “Grandpa, what flower is that one? / Silence. He would not reply”). The grandfather did not understand the language of flowers; he walked on the “campo do céu,” the only “chão firme que palmilhava” (Idem; “the field of the sky;” “firm ground he treaded”). While the grandfather pointed in the direction of the stars, “meu coração se perdia / em outros amores—o chão próximo / onde vivas cintilavam flores” (215; “my heart got lost / in other forms of love—the ground nearby / where the flowers sparkled with life”).

This poem could be read as a tropical, domestic re-staging of the central scene in Raphael's famed fresco *The School of Athens*. In the painting, an older Plato is seen pointing upwards towards heaven and in the direction of *metaphysics*, the realm of abstract forms and ideas, at the same time as a younger Aristotle, his disciple, turns his open hand to the earth, drawing attention to *physis*, the Ancient Greek word for nature. Similar to Plato, the grandfather in the poem focuses on the faraway sky and is oblivious to what is closer to him. For the little girl, in turn, the distant stars are meaningless entities, and, like Aristotle, she is interested in what grows and thrives at her fingertips, namely the variety of tropical flowers in the garden. But while Aristotle strove to catalogue and classify different forms of life in order to fit them into his overarching philosophical system, the girl is fascinated by the uniqueness of each plant enumerated in the poem: "junquilha, onze horas / boca-de-lobo, colchão de noiva," and so on (214; "jonquil, moss-rose purslane, snapdragon, spurge"). In the end, both Plato and Aristotle superimposed theoretical, lifeless categories onto the real, whereas the girl firmly anchors her thought on the vitality and multiplicity of life forms on the ground. By implicitly evoking the famous painting, Cabral is at once inscribing everyday existence in the Amazon within a cultural matrix that includes the Western philosophical canon and, at the same time, challenging this very tradition of thought by juxtaposing it to a worldview attuned to the specificities of rainforest nature.

The poem playfully encapsulates the Western, hierarchical approach to the natural world. On the one hand, readers are introduced to the standpoint of an older male in a position of authority, who privileges what is high-above and is therefore not site-specific but aspires towards universality. This worldview is pitted against that of the girl, who concentrates on the entities that are part of her immediate environment and that offer her a multisensorial and material experience. In broad brush strokes, Western

views of nature, and of the Amazon more specifically, have traditionally espoused a perspective similar to that of the grandfather. From the texts of naturalists who visited the region in the name of science and penned their impressions of the area—Alexander von Humboldt, Alfred Russel Wallace, Richard Spruce, Henry Walter Bates, among many others—to the so-called “novels of the jungle” that depict a male protagonist struggling to come to terms with a foreign and potentially hostile natural environment, writings about the Amazon have foregrounded large vistas and the all-encompassing image of an overwhelming, mysterious nature whose secrets need to be deciphered so that it can better be tamed and controlled.³

In her writings about the Amazon, Cabral frequently adopts the viewpoint of the little girl in the poem. Hers is not the all-encompassing, bird’s-eye outlook of a scientist or a traveler (D. Silva 3), akin to the imperial gaze described by Mary Louise Pratt of those who contemplate the landscape as a space to be conquered and exploited. Rather, she takes on the perspective of someone who has a lived, emotional relation to the place and all its inhabitants.⁴ Cabral strove to free literary language about the region from a male-centered, grandiloquent style that hovered between admiration for the magnificence of the rainforest and fear of an unknown and threatening environment (A. Silva 152; 158-60). Instead of a “cosmic totality” and of an “expanded scene” she highlights the particularities of Amazonia and hones in on details of existence in the region (A. Silva 60).

The only female member, during her youth, of the so-called *Clube da Madrugada* (Club of Dawn), an artistic and literary association founded in Manaus in 1954,⁵ Cabral’s texts remained faithful to the goal of this group to renew the region’s letters, drawing inspiration from Brazilian Modernism and its ripple effects in the country’s literary panorama.⁶ Thinkers linked to the Club questioned the stereotypical

portrayal of the Amazonian natural environment in literature as an entity standing in opposition to human beings, who frequently succumb to its might (Cantarelli, “O Que Querem” 86). In her texts, from the early collection of short stories *Alameda* (*Alleyway*, 1963), to subsequent poetry books, including the above-mentioned *Visgo da Terra*, her work that deals more closely with life in Amazonia, Cabral emphasizes the ties binding humans and other living beings and depicts a natural world that, far from foreign, mysterious or ominous, is part and parcel of everyday routines.

In “Comunhão/Excomunhão” (“Communion/Excommunication”) she addresses the constant presence of the non-human in all aspects of human life. She writes that “O mundo lá fora não é tão fora assim. [...] Há polpa de frutas no céu de nossa boca / e contacto de outras peles contra o tato,” (*Déu* 275; “The world outside is not so much outside. [...] / There is the pulp of fruits in the roof of our mouth / and the contact of other skins against our touch”). The outside constantly impinges upon the inside, the non-human upon the human and others upon the self to a point where the boundaries between these various dichotomous terms start to fade. In the poem, the commerce with the non-human realm is understood as a defining feature of human existence. Conversely, humans’ separation from the ground that sustains them is presented as a curse:

o abstrato nos assusta: liso abismo
onde sem arrimo de ramos ou remos escorregamos
nus, destituídos de asas barbatanas patas
expulsos do mundo no degredo de nós mesmo (Idem)

abstraction scares us: a smooth abyss
where we slip without the support of branches or oars

naked, without wings fins paws

expelled from the world in exile from ourselves

The flight into an abstract world apart from non-human beings, oblivious to the wings, fins and paws that are part and parcel of human lives, is understood as an “excommunication,” a barren exile from meaningful existence. It is only through permanent communion with non-human others that one becomes fully human.

In her writings, Cabral comes back time and again to the non-human beings that shaped her early years in the Amazon, to her family’s home and to the daily habits of life in Manaus, as she did in “Na Vizinhança das Estrelas.” In the poem “Estrangeira” (“Foreigner”), for instance, she writes that “estão plantados meus pés” in the “barro” of the Southern hemisphere, “junto a raízes bem fundas” (331; “feet are planted;” “clay;” “next to very deep roots”) and she acknowledges in an interview with Elzbieta Szoka that “my childhood in Manaus was something extremely important for me” (65). The significance of infancy in Cabral’s texts goes beyond her nostalgia for the sights, sounds and customs of the place where she spent the early part of her life.⁷ She highlights the close relationship between the little girl she once was and the animals and plants from her native region, a link that, in her texts, appears as increasingly broken as people grow up. Her return to her childhood is therefore a form of grounding her literature, a way to reconnect with the here-and-now and to be reminded of the continuities that bind together humans and other forms of life.

But Cabral’s oeuvre cannot be reduced to a narrow focus on specific features of Amazonian life. While her work is grounded in Amazonia, a place to which her texts return time and again, she also wrote several books of poetry that concentrate on her experiences outside of Brazil, including *Torna-Viagem (Return-Trip)*, 1981, about the Middle East, and *Rês Desgarrada (Stray Calf)*, 1994 that reflects upon the time she

spent in the United States.⁸ Even her writings about the Amazon, while beholden to the particulars of existence in the area, often point in the direction of larger issues that go beyond that geographical location. Cabral's grounding of her texts in concrete, lived experience goes hand in hand with an effort to place her insights about her native region in a broader context (Frota 402).⁹

Going back to the poem "Na Vizinhança das Estrelas," one might say that Cabral's literary voice, while partial to the position of the little girl, often hovers between her emphasis on tangible features of the natural environment and the grandfather's attention to what lies outside the area. Her detail-oriented texts about Amazonian plants and animals do not preclude a more speculative engagement with issues pertaining to the relationship between non-humans and humans at a time of widespread environmental devastation. Far from regarding Amazonia as an isolated region, divorced from historical becoming,¹⁰ she places the area at the center of her reflections about the human impact upon the natural world. The grounding of her work in Amazonia, then, is an entryway into a reflection about humans' mindless drive to dominate nature. Cabral highlights the centrality of the Amazon in any discussion about the connection between human and non-human life and offers a specifically Amazonian approach to environmentalism.

In this chapter, I discuss the pendular movement in Cabral's texts between a grounded focus on Amazonian particularities and their link to the environmental challenges humans face by concentrating on a salient theme in her body of writing. I analyze her texts on dietary issues and on the politics of eating those beings with whom we share our lives. Growing up in a region known for its lush vegetation, Cabral portrays the casual eating plants and animals as a cruel, mindless act of daily existence. Humans behave as if flora and fauna were limitless, as if the exuberance of Amazonian

life were ubiquitous and boundless. But, as we now know full well, they are not eternal and their reckless consumption as an inexhaustible resource endangers the balance of life on the planet. In my analysis, I begin by considering Cabral's writings on the consumption plants and then move on to a discussion of her texts on the slaughter of animals and their use as food and raw materials. I end by reflecting on Cabral's approach to food ethics in the context of current debates on ecofeminism and the environmentalist critique of consumerism.

The Ethics of Eating Plants

The topic of food ethics and of considering who eats whom and on what grounds permeates the entirety of Cabral's corpus. Already in *Alameda*, we encounter a short-story titled "Laranja de Sobremesa" ("Dessert Orange") that draws the reader's attention to the violence inherent in eating other beings. The narrative begins with an idyllic image of a table set for dessert, the white china contrasting with the color of the orange sitting on top of it, ready to be cut open for degustation. But, the narrator warns us, "[a]quele momento de harmonia, de beleza simples, era inconsistente e precário," for the orange was about to be mindlessly devoured (39; "[t]hat moment of harmony, of simple beauty, was inconsistent and precarious"). "O gesto é tão implícito," writes the narrator, "que não ocorre a ninguém a cerimónia de um sacrifício: — a vida imolada à vida" (Idem; "The gesture is so implicit that the ceremony of a sacrifice occurs to no one: —life immolated to life"). Those who eat the orange are oblivious to the fact that they are sacrificing another living being to their hunger. They forget "a melancolia dos instantes e dos seres únicos, desde que tudo se assemelha e se dissolve em linhas gerais sob nossos olhos" (Idem; "the melancholy of the instants and of unique beings, since everything looks similar and dissolves in general features before our eyes"). The short

story memorializes the uniqueness of the orange that goes unnoticed when the fruit is consumed without a second thought.

We find in this early narrative many of the traits that define Cabral's subsequent poetry on food. For one, the story underlines the brutality that is part and parcel of any act of eating: "Ei-la espetada pelo garfo; entregando-se mansamente ao esquartejar da faca" (40; "There [the orange] was, stabbed by the fork; it delivered itself meekly to the quartering by the knife"). The language used to describe the cutting of the orange—"stabbed;" "quartering"—points to acts of aggression, the fruit being portrayed as passively enduring the attacks. After undergoing the "triturar dos dentes" (40; "grinding of the teeth"), the orange turns into juice that runs down the throat, while the pomace is rejected. Half bestial, half machine-like, humans are unflatteringly depicted as cruel, senseless entities, inured to the suffering of others, and who take advantage of the powerlessness of the fruit to satisfy their needs for nourishment.

"Laranja de Sobremesa," like several other texts by Cabral on eating, also draws attention to the history behind the food we put on our plates. The narrator laments that "a sua história é episódio secundário, para sempre sepultado. Quem sabe da mão que a plantou, do tempo do plantio? A pureza rara e primitiva da laranjeira intocada pelo enxêrto. Suas ânsias de ser no âmago da semente, seus primeiros impulsos para conquista do ar e da luz" (40-41; "[the orange's] story is a secondary episode, forever buried. Who knows about the hand that planted it, about the time of planting? The rare and primitive purity of the orange tree untouched by grafts. Its cravings for being at the heart of the seed, its first impulses towards the conquest of air and light").¹¹ The fruit we eat are made possible by farmers who plant seeds and graft trees and whose work is often overlooked. But, as this passage points out, the story of fruit goes beyond human will and desire. The plants themselves have their own aspirations depicted in the story.

The narrator mentions here the primitive orange tree, before it was subjected to grafting to satisfy the human palate. The narrative acknowledges the orange seeds' longings and plans for the future, which were thwarted by human intervention. Tamed by human hand, the plant will be unable to freely exist on its own terms. The story ends on a sad note: "No prato, as sementes velam pela laranja desaparecida e se prometem em vão repeti-la dentro em breve" (41; "On the plate, the seeds mourn the lost orange and promise in vain to repeat it soon"). While the seeds remain hopeful of reproduction, the narrator knows of their sterile fate as waste. In order for humans to thrive, the orange and its progeny had to perish.

In this, as in other short stories from *Alameda*, the narrator adopts flora's point of view. In "A Agonia da Rosa" ("The Agony of the Rose"), a flower bemoans its demise that started when it was cut down to be sold in a flower shop as "mercadoria para consumo" (84; "merchandise for consumption"). Another flower, an orchid, laments its objectification in "A Orquídea da Exposição" ("The Orchid from the Exhibition"). Taken from the mango tree upon which it had grown to be displayed at a flower show, the orchid criticizes the "falta de respeito" (143; "lack of respect") of humans towards plants. While these and other stories openly attribute human traits to plants—vanity, anger, despair—in a clear case of anthropomorphism, they also decenter humans as the only source of meaning. The narratives resort to anthropomorphic expressions to put the reader in the shoes of the plant, so to speak, and to consider what the world would look like from that novel point of view. The result is a clear indictment of the commodification of flowers that entails the destruction of a plant for the sake of brief moments of human aesthetic pleasure.

As in the case of the flowers, "Laranja de Sobremesa" and other poems on food consumption underline the negative consequences of applying the logic of the market to

living beings. The fruit was not treasured because it is not a scarce good: “a laranja [...] tenha sido comprada à dúzia, colhida ao cento. [...] tanto transbordam nas quitantas os paneiros e tão altas as pirâmides e pilhas nos mercados e nas feiras. Tão incontáveis os laranjais perfumados e prenhes ao longo das estradas, dos caminhos-de-ferro” (39-40; “the orange [...] was bought by the dozen and harvested by the hundreds. [...] the baskets are so overflowing [with oranges] in the stores and the pyramids and piles [of them] in the markets and fairs are so tall. So countless are the perfumed and fecund orange orchards along the roads, the railroads”). Obeying the law of supply and demand, the abundance of oranges leads to a devaluing of the fruit. Humans forget that, the omnipresence of orange orchards notwithstanding, each orange tree is a living being that should pursue its mode of existence, independent of its usefulness for humans.

The moment of eating the orange “passaria desapercibido,” as the narrator puts it, “como as coisas diárias de que se tece a vida. Nenhuma emoção, pois não há tempo para elas quando se tem a embotada certeza de que o amanhã nos colocará diante do mesmo quadro: a laranja de sobremesa” (39; “would pass unnoticed like the daily things that make up the fabric of life. No emotion, for there is no time for those when we are numbly certain that we will find ourselves before the same situation tomorrow: the dessert orange”). The certainty that tomorrow another orange will effortlessly materialize for dessert makes the eating of the fruit an automatic gesture that fails to consider the rightful aspirations of the plant to have its seeds turn into another tree. The short-story challenges our food habits with disturbing questions: What if we were to take the perspective of the orange tree into consideration? How would that change the way we eat its fruit? What are the consequences of our mindless consumption of plants? And what if, one day, there were no more orange trees, no more oranges to eat?

Cabral returns to the ethical issues raised by eating plants in several other texts dispersed throughout her body of writing. In the poem “Natureza Morta” (“Still Life”), from *Intramuros*, the author plays with the Portuguese for “still life,” literally “dead nature,” in her description of a series of fruit and vegetables that are commonly eaten in Brazil: orange, lettuce, papaya and sugar-apple. She writes that we “improvisar jardins / nas toalhas,” but those are made of dead plants cultivated solely for “a sede do homem” (14; “improvise gardens / on the table cloths;” “the thirst of humans”).

The poem “Feira” (“Market”), also from *Intramuros*, portrays the slow death of vegetables lying in wait to be purchased: “Murcham porém legumes e hortaliças / e as beterrabas saudosas da terra / roxas ressentem-se no frio do exílio” (15; “However, vegetables and greens wither / and the beets longing for the soil / in their purple color resent the cold of exile”). Like previous texts, this poem adopts the viewpoint of beets, who long to return to the soil from where they were forcefully removed by humans. In “Supermercado” (“Supermarket”), from the poetry collection *Ponto de Cruz* (*Cross Stitch*, 1979), we come back to the display of dead fruit soon to be bought and consumed by humans: “laranjas-pêras / prisioneiras me espiam pelo vão de redes / Jirimuns pendem no ar, de corda ao pescoço” (81; “oranges / like prisoners look at me through the holes in the nets. / Pumpkins hung in the air, a rope around their neck”). The text denounces the ways in which humans debase plants by placing them in netted bags and literally hanging them. Humans treat fruit and vegetables as if they were prisoners at the mercy of people and existing only to serve their desires.

In these poems about food on display in markets and in supermarkets, humans voyeuristically contemplate plants, drawing pleasure from the fact that they will soon be able to eat them. Unlike the enjoyable experience of humans, the plants’ ordeal is described, as in “Laranja de Sobremesa,” by resorting to violent vocabulary: sliced

tomatoes “agonizando em leito de alfaces;” the wheat that “ontem livre ao vento / é pão cativo no teu ventre;” sugar is “dor de cana cristalizada;” and garlic and pepper undergo a “massacre” in the mortar (*Intramuros* 16; “agonize in a bed of lettuce,” “Buffet Miniatura”; *Ponto de Cruz* 86; “was yesterday free in the wind / is now captive bread in your belly,” “the pain of crystalized sugar cane,” “Café da Manhã”; *Visgo da Terra*, 164; “massacre,” “A Casa,”). As in the short stories from *Alameda*, one could read such expressions as anthropomorphous metaphors that project human sensations onto plants. Following this train of thought, these descriptions would simply portray how humans would feel, were they in the same situation as the plants. A bolder interpretation of Cabral’s texts on flora, however, would consider the possibility of plants actually feeling imprisoned and experiencing the suffering meted out to them by humans as the punishment for some unknown crime. In line with recent scientific research on plants that suggests flora is capable of activities used to be ascribed only to animals, including thinking, memory, communication and feeling distress,¹² Cabral’s texts interpellate the reader by asking: What if plants really feel pain? Would you eat them all the same like before?

Cabral hints at plants’ similarity to animals when she describes those who eat them as vampires sucking out their life force. She writes in “Café da Manhã” (“Breakfast”) that the “café aos goles é sangue / que, vampiro engoles” (*Déu* 86; “the coffee you gulp down is blood / that you, as a vampire, swallow”). In “Passeio a Flores” (“Walk to Flores”) she portrays her childhood self on a trip to the cemetery, where, to the dismay of her mother, she unceremoniously eats sour cherries and pitangas as a “sacrílega vampira / chupando a seiva dos mortos / no sangue vivo das frutas” (174; “sacrilegious vampire / sucking the sap of the dead / in the live blood of fruit”). The poem depicts the circular movement of life: the dead bodies of the buried human beings

nourish the soil where the plants thrive, bearing fruit. In an emblematic twist, typical of Cabral's writings, the little girl, oblivious to social conventions, inscribes herself in life's cycles by eating the fruit that contains traces of her dead relatives' blood. But the text adds a critical layer to this apparently seamless flow of vitality. The little girl is described as a "vampire" not only because she is indirectly feeding on the nutrients provided by human cadavers but also because she is enjoying the "blood" of fruit. Similar to "Café da Manhã," this poem underlines the human dependence on flora, from which we literally draw our energy. Human life is made possible by our parasitic, vampire-like use of plants' "blood."

Cabral does not condemn the fact that humans eat plants, knowing full well that all animals rely on vegetal life for their survival. What her writings denounce is the human failure to recognize their core indebtedness to flora and the banality of the violence exerted upon plants, placed at the service of human wants. What is more, the brutal treatment of plants is performed unawares, adding insult to injury. Cabral sees plants as living beings with rightful expectations to lead their existence on their own terms and decries the thoughtless human exceptionalism that instrumentalizes flora. The unreflective consumption of fruit and vegetables taints not only human behavior towards plants, but also towards animals and towards the natural environment as a whole.

Should Humans Eat Other Animals?

The ethical issues surrounding the eating of vegetal life notwithstanding, consuming plants is an unavoidable part of human existence. This situation differs when it comes to animals, in that humanity can well survive without eating animals or products of animal origin. Cabral's reflections on eating, therefore, become even more pointed when it

comes to the consumption of fish or meat. As in the case of plants, she underlines the omnipresent violence that is embedded in our eating habits. In the above-mentioned poem “Café da Manhã,” for instance, the daily routine of having breakfast is likened to the immolation of an animal “no altar da mesa:” “leite, manteiga e queijo / celebram com saque a vitória / sobre o bezerro indefeso” (*Déu* 86; “in the altar of the table;” “milk, butter and cheese / celebrate with looting the victory / over a defenseless calf,”). In another poem, she refers to the eating of “sofisticados bifés” as a means to “oblitera o massacre dos bois” (155; “sophisticated steaks;” “obliterate the massacre of oxen”). According to Cabral, every time they consume meat and other animal products, humans re-enact their triumph in a long-standing war waged against animals and against nature as a whole. Similar to plants, animals are depicted as helpless, “defenseless” martyrs of human aggressive behavior. As if ashamed of their own conduct, humans then “obliterate” the proof of their violent behavior by eating the bodies of their victims.

Cabral’s poetry shows how animals, like plants, aspire to a life unimpeded by humans and their needs for nourishment. In the poem “Ovo Estrelado” (“Fried Egg”), the egg is likened to a sun gazing upon the one about to eat it from the “céu do prato” (*Intramuros* 11; “sky of the plate”). This poetic scenario is suddenly shattered by the reflection that “[é] quando entalo / de cara a cara / com o nunca pássaro” (Idem; “This is when I come / face to face / with the never bird”). By the simple act of eating a fried egg, humans prevent an animal from being born and stop the reproductive process of hens in its tracks. Similar to what happens with plants, animals’ existence and their plans for the future are thwarted by human action. For Cabral, however, animal eating is portrayed as crueler and more shameful than the consumption of plants, not only because it is not necessary for human life but also because of the proximity between human and non-human animals.

In the poem “Supermercado” we again find the above-mentioned, voyeuristic human gaze. Buyers contemplate “[a]trás de esquifes-vitrines perus e frangos / decapitados, esartejados” who “ofertam-se / *caro data vermi* ao verme que todos somos / enquanto o fregês necrófilo confesso / pede ao balconista cem gramas de *morta*” (*Déu* 81; “Behind coffins-display cases turkeys and chicken / decapitated, quartered, offer themselves / *caro data vermi* to the worms that we all are / while the costumer, an avowed necrophile / asks the seller for one hundred grams of *dead*”). This section of the poem is structured around a series of permutations between life and death, the human and non-human realms. Live animals are slaughtered to become dead bodies in the supermarket. They turn into *caro data vermi*—cadavers, food to be given to the worms—and offer themselves to necrophiliac humans-as-worms, who covet the dead meat. The text points to an underlying affinity between human and non-human animals: all are *caro data vermi*, that is to say, all will turn, once dead, into food for worms. But, more relevant still, humans are similar to worms in their desire to eat the dead body of other animals. This animalization of those who eat meat highlights not only the circle of life whereby one animal eats another, but also the beast-like traits of human beings.

Cabral underlines the similarities between humans and other animals in several other texts. In “Chuva em Abril” (“Rain in April”), for instance, she writes that

[n]o seio do úmido abril
de corpo molhado e mudo
sou um excêntrico peixe
cruzando o aquário da rua (*Rasos* 93)

[i]n the bosom of a humid April

with a wet and mute body

I am an eccentric fish

crossing the aquarium of the street.

In other poems, she goes beyond metaphors and states her kinship with animals more directly. She describes herself as a “irmã de tartarugas e lesmas” in “Canção do Exílio” (“Song of Exile”) and, in “Por Toda a Parte o Rio” (“Everywhere the River”) she again mentions that “nós todos tão sáurios tão / irmãos de peixes e quelônios” (*Déu* 72; “sister of turtles and slugs,” “Song of Exile”; 186; “all of us [humans] are such reptiles, so / much brothers of fish and turtles”). In “Anfíbia” (“Amphibious”) she states that she feels uncomfortable in the world of humans and describes herself as a “tartaruga nas ruas” (201; “turtle in the street”). She comments upon how adults “massacram meu pendor anfíbio” by keeping her younger self, “essa menina irmã de tartarugas,” “aprisionam” in a living room (Idem; “massacre my amphibious tendency;” “that girl who was a sister of turtles;” “imprisoned”). Cabral harks back here once again to the close connection between children and non-humans, a link that fades as humans grow up and become entangled in social conventions that establish strict, arbitrary divisions between human culture and the natural world.

The ties binding humans and other animals are perhaps best articulated in the poem “Encontro no Jardim” (“Encounter in the Garden”), part of the collection *Jaula* from 2006. Cabral recounts a meeting between a snake and a woman in a garden, in a clear allusion to the Biblical story of the fall narrated in the Book of Genesis. The four stanzas of the poem portray different stages in the perception of the snake. The typographic layout of the first stanza evokes the sinuous body of the animal when the woman spots it moving through the garden and is startled by its agile body. In the

second stanza, the two come face to face, a situation mirrored, once again, by the structure of the verses:

Olhei-a frente a frente:
sua cabeça
erguida em talo
eu entalada
o colo em sobressalto. (*Jaula* 52)

I looked at it face to face
its head
risen like a branch
I was jammed
my breast in shock.

The body of the woman and that of the animal “postos em confronto” and the presence of the snake, its upper body risen from the ground, appears as threatening (Idem; “confront one another”). The “estranheza” of the latter then triggers a sense of revulsion and a feeling of “asco” sets in (Idem; “strangeness;” “disgust”).

The second stanza reflects the cultural history of interactions between humans and snakes, starting in the narrative of the Garden of Eden, where Eve is punished for believing the animal and for persuading Adam to eat the fruit from the forbidden tree of knowledge, thus triggering the couple’s expulsion from Paradise. Humans gave in to their animality by listening to the advice of the snake, so the usual interpretation of the Biblical story goes. Significantly, it was a woman, considered in patriarchal societies as being closer to nature and to animals, who was guilty of humanity’s fall. And it was

through eating—something that humans share with other animals—that the original sin took place.

The standoff between the woman and the snake in Cabral's poem is reminiscent of Clarice Lispector's renowned confrontation with a cockroach in her famous novel *A Paixão Segundo G. H.* (1964; *The Passion According to G. H.*, 1988). Both texts allude to humans' efforts to distance themselves from their animal side, a separation that retraces several other binaries that have structured Western modernity, including the division between soul and body; the Cartesian *res cogitans* and *res extensa*; mind and matter; culture and nature, to name but a few. The anxiety felt by the woman when she looked straight at the snake was not so much a result of fear for her personal safety. Rather, she was scared of the appeal of the animal, afraid of being charmed by the snake, and her "disgust" was her retreat into her human self in an effort to move away from the allure of the non-human.

The confrontation between the two ends in the third stanza. The Biblical undertones of the poem continue as the woman is struck by a "revelação" that "em luz se acende," namely, that she shares many traits with the snake (*Jaula* 53; "revelation / comes to light"):

A comum sedução pelo verde

[...]

colando-se em nossa epiderme

[...]

Eu também ser de veneno.

Eu também ser inepto ao voo.

Ambas inquilinas do mesmo solo.

Ambas coincidentes no tempo. (Idem)

The common seduction by the green

[...]

gluing itself to our epidermis

[...]

I am also a being of poison.

I am also unable to fly.

We both inhabit the same soil.

We both coincide in time.

Cabral recognizes the religious connotations linking women and snakes, all the while subverting the interpretation of this connection as a source of depravity and abjection.

At the same time, she undoes the oppositions that separate humans and animals.

Following in the footsteps of the protagonist in Lispector's novel, the woman touches

“sem nojo / o corpo da exotica irmã” in the last stanza of the poem (Idem; “without disgust / the body of the exotic sister”).¹³ Her proximity with the snake is shown in a

positive light, their meeting being written in the stars from time immemorial (Idem; “O encontro desde sempre inscrito / nos desígnios de Aldebarã”). Unlike the Biblical

encounter between the woman and the snake that dictates a separation of humanity from the rest of the natural world, the knowledge gathered by the woman in the poem points to the close ties that bind humans to non-human beings.¹⁴

One should note that the snake is a central animal not only in the Western cultural matrix but also in Amazonian thought. The reptile in the poem evokes both the Judeo-Christian narrative of Creation and the Cobra Grande or Yakumama of Amazonian mythology, which is frequently associated to the winding rivers from the region (Coleman 218). In this, as in other poems, Cabral turns to the Amazonian plants

and animals she is familiar with as a point of departure for a broader discussion on the proximity between humans and non-humans. She grounds her poetry on her lived experiences in the Amazon, drawing the implications of the web of life tying flora, fauna and human existence and showing that, at the core, humans are not so different from all other living beings.

The awareness of the countless traits humanity shares with other animals, often described as sisters or brothers of humans, has a direct bearing on Cabral's reflections on food ethics. For who would eat one's sibling out of pleasure? Would humans still consume animal flesh were they cognizant of the affinities between them and those whose bodies they eat? This is the issue Cabral raises in her poem "Parentesco" ("Kinship"). She writes that "[a]ntes só conhecia o tucunaré / da banca do mercado, ensanguentado / ou saltitante no bojo da canoa" (*Jaula 37*; "Before I only knew the tucunaré [Amazonian species of fish] / from the market stalls, bloodied / or jumping at the bottom of a canoe"). "Tucunaré para mim era manjar," she continues, "aroma na terrina impelindo-me a comer" (Idem; "Tucunaré for me was a delicacy / a smell in the tureen hooking me / impelling me to eat"). The author, like most humans, reduced the tucunaré to a dish to be enjoyed; the only images of the fish she knew were those related to its capture and sale. She was therefore "perplexa, genuflexa" by the "história de seu universo" and felt like the fish's "parenta" when she saw how it protects its young with "amorosos cuidados" from the dangers of the river (Idem; "perplexed, floored;" "history of its universe;" "relative;" "amorous care").¹⁵ Cabral recognizes that the tucunaré has its own story and universe, which does not differ radically from that of humans. The writer empathizes with the animal's drive to protect its offspring to the point where she sees him as a relative.

Does Cabral's awareness of the continuities linking humans to other animals lead her to advocate for vegetarianism or even veganism? While she never explicitly argues that humans should abstain from eating meat, fish and other animal products, the author clearly condemns the suffering of animals slaughtered for the sole purpose of being consumed by humans. In the poem "Tartarugada" ("Turtle Stew"), she describes in excruciatingly painful detail the process of preparing this Amazonian dish. Their shell on the ground, the turtles move their legs in vain in the air as the machete hits their chest again and again, its blade "tornado de morte," (*Jaula* 47; "darkened by death"). The longevity of the animals—their "semi-eternidade" (Idem; "semi-eternity")—comes undone under the violent human blows. The author comments, like a Greek tragedy choir, on this horrific scene: "Deus, quanta fúria injusta / estraçalhava a dura urna / fazendo o sangue espirrar" (Idem; "God, such an unjust fury / tore apart the hard urn / making the blood spatter"). As in other poems, non-humans are portrayed as "indefesas" victims of human cruelty (Idem; "defenseless"). With their "[p]eito violado carne em pedaços," the animal's heart was still beating in a sign of "vitória? protesto? censura?," the author asks herself (Idem; "chest violated meat in pieces;" "victory? protest? censure?"). Does the turtles' body language stand for a wordless complaint and condemnation of human actions? Or are they expressing their victory over humans, knowing full well that humanity's dominance over the natural world and over animal and plant life is transient, a mere blip in the existence of the planet?

The absurdity of the whole episode comes through in the final words of the poem, when the family sits down for lunch to eat turtle stew: "E comíamos, grã-finos canibais / —de garfo e faca— / em pratos de porcelana" (48; "And we ate, posh cannibals / —with fork and knife— / on china dishes"). The elegance of the meal contrasts sharply with the messy, brutal slaughtering of the turtles. Cabral draws

attention, once again, to the kinship between humans and animals when she depicts those partaking in the meal as “cannibals,” eating the flesh of animals she often describes as her siblings. Because of excessive capture, turtles are now endangered in many areas of the Amazon, and turtle stew, a traditional Amazonian dish, is eaten only in very special occasions. While Cabral is often nostalgic about her childhood in Amazonia, that allowed her to grow up in close proximity to plants and animals, she does not uncritically embrace all aspects of life in the region. She recognizes that the eating of animals and animal products has deep roots in her Brazilian and Amazonian culture and does not shy away from exposing the cruelty of these customs.

If the author already considers traditional animal killing and eating as problematic, she is an even fiercer critic of the contemporary meat industry that slaughters animals to sell their flesh on a mass scale. In the poem “Açougue” (“Slaughterhouse”), she paints a damning portrait of meat consumption, starting with the killing of animals, through the purchase of their flesh, all the way to human meals. The poem begins by contrasting the “olhos de vidro” and “cabeça decepada” of an animal reduced to its body parts to its former existence, when it was a “semovente ser no verde / pasto da manhã clara” (*Jaula* 58; “glassy eyes;” “chopped off head;” “self-moving being in the green / pasture of the bright morning”). Oblivious of the animal that once enjoyed its life in green pastures, customers of the butcher shop “só vê na carne / nervos e teor de gordura / cor textura grau de frescor” (Idem; “only see in meat / nerves and amount of fat / color texture and degree of freshness”). Cabral tellingly titles another of her poems about meat consumption “Surdos e Cegos” (“Deaf and Blind”). In this text, she accuses people who absent-mindedly eat meat, without registering the distress of animals (57; “distráidos / mastigam sangrentos bifés;” “distractedly / chew bloody stakes”).¹⁶ Exacerbating the violent vocabulary employed in her writings about

the eating of plants, Cabral casts human beings as hangmen who absent-mindedly torture and kill animals.

Shocked by most people's callous approach to animal suffering, the author ends "Açougue" by asking "que fome tão feroz é essa / capaz de geral o massacre / de mansos bois, tenras vitelas? / Que fome essa cujo repasto / implica o brutal holocausto?" (58-59; "what hunger so ferocious is this / capable of generating the massacre / of tame oxen, tender calves? / What hunger is this whose satiation / implies a brutal holocaust?"). The strong language used in the end of the text leaves no doubt as to the author's condemnation of the consumption of meat. Cabral defines the industrial slaughtering and mass sale of animal meat as a holocaust, thus following in the footsteps of many animal rights activists who liken the meat industry to the terrible deeds perpetrated against Jews in Nazi Germany.¹⁷ If one considers, as Cabral did, that animals are the sisters and brothers of human beings, then her reference to the Holocaust does not serve as a means to relativize and diminish the horrors of the Second World War. Rather, by drawing this comparison, she underscores the heinous character of human actions towards animals.

Food Ethics, Feminism and a Critique of Consumerism

Cabral's focus on food ethics in several of her writings evokes ecofeminist debates about the mindful eating of plants and about the consumption of animals and animal products. As Carol Adams and Lori Gruen point out, feminism has, from its inception as an organized movement in the nineteenth century all the way to the present day, often intersected with environmental and animal rights activism ("Groundwork" n.p.). If sexism and speciesism go together, then a reflection about women's role in our society should go hand in hand with a discussion of the human treatment of plants and animals.

In her now classic study *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (1990), Adams argues that meat eating is associated in many cultures to masculinity and to virility, while a plant-based diet is commonly seen as more suitable for women. The slaughtering of animals and the consumption of meat are perceived as ways to reaffirm male domination over the natural environment and the bodies of non-humans, in the same way as patriarchy naturalizes male control over the female body.

Ecofeminist debates, while not occupying center-stage in Cabral's poetry, have certainly informed her texts. A woman writing in the male-dominated world of Amazonian letters, the author's focus on domesticity and on everyday routines, including the preparation of food, brings to literature topics that used to fall under the purview of women's issues.¹⁸ A feminist slant can be found in several of the author's texts. In "Sendas de Rugas" ("Paths of Wrinkles"), for instance, she writes that "insônia e o sono habitam / o rosto dessas mulheres" who "caminham para a morte / pelas sendas de suas rugas" and "cobrem os seios lassos" with the "restos de sonhos" (*Déu* 80; "insomnia and sleep inhabit / the faces of those women;" "walk towards death / through the paths of their wrinkles;" "cover their baggy breasts;" "rests of dreams"). Cabral bemoans the fate of middle-aged women who live off "da memória de outros dias (...) se nutrem" and not off the "das carnes que temperam" (Idem; "live off the memory of other days;" "meat they season"). Immersed in household chores such as cooking, women cannot pursue the dreams of their youth and, all of a sudden, they "[p]assaste de mulher a pessoa," that is to say, they are no longer considered to be attractive and, therefore, lose their sexual appeal (*Rasos* 45; "passed from woman to person"). According to the reductive view of femininity Cabral is caricaturing here, women are valued for their sexual, child-bearing potential and their primary function is to perform household tasks.

In a patriarchal culture, women are perceived as being closer to nature and to non-humans.¹⁹ Does Cabral's sense of proximity to plants and animals, then, arise from the fact that she is a woman? Is the author falling under a patriarchal logic when she sees women and children as closer to the natural environment than men? Cabral's reflections on food ethics and her condemnation of the thoughtless consumption of plants and animals should be interpreted in the context of a broader societal critique against the worst excesses of modernity. Already in *Alameda*, the author decries a short-sighted view of progress in short stories such as "A Praça" ("The Square"), where the narrator chronicles the transformation of a piece of land into a city square, lamenting the disappearance of plants and animals to give way to concrete.

Cabral's questioning of the core values of modern culture continues in her poetry. In "Rastros de Paraíso" ("Traces of Paradise"), she asks rhetorically: "Mas os pássaros e os peixes / ubi sunt? / Mas as flores e as frutas / ubi sunt? / Mas as cobras e as feras / ubi sunt?" (*Intramuros* 47; "But the birds and the fish / *ubi sunt?* / But the flowers and the fruit / *ubi sunt?* / But the snakes and the beasts / *ubi sunt?*"). The text, written in the city of São Paulo, mourns the vanishing of non-humans from the urban landscape, with only traces of what was once a Paradisiac natural world left behind. The poem "Variações na Paisagem" ("Variations in the Landscape") similarly addresses the negative transformations imposed upon the environment by a distorted view of progress:

Porém o homem na pungente urgência de seu curto

prazo, agride com vigor o regaço da paisagem:

[...]

e chegam fartos camiões que vomitam

outros tijolos, cimento e areia de nova argamassa (*Déu* 317)

But man in the pungent urgency of his short
term, aggresses with vigor the lap of landscape:

[...]

and sated trucks arrive and quickly vomit

other bricks, cement and the sand of a new mortar

Humans pave over the land and build houses with bricks and mortar, thus destroying the landscape and the habitat of countless non-human beings.²⁰

The view of progress as a drive towards urbanization is accompanied by a growing consumption of goods, to a point where humans are themselves commodified. In the poem “Esquartejamento” (“Quartering”), Cabral shows how the logic of the market permeates all aspects of the human body: “Vendeu o branco sorriso / à fábrica de dentífrico / a cabeleira basta / ao xampu Número Um / o busto farto à marca / de sutiãs de náilon” (*Déu* 258; “She sold her white smile / to the factory that makes tooth paste / the abundant hair / to the Number One shampoo / the ample bust to the brand / of nylon bras”). The body of a woman becomes “pasto de milhões de olhos / que lhe compram os pedaços / ao preço vil do mercado” (Idem; “fodder for millions of eyes / that buy its pieces / at the vile price pf the market”). Similar to the body of an animal being cut up for its pieces to be displayed in a supermarket and purchased by avid customers, the body of the woman is here “quartered” and placed at the service of companies eager to sell their products.

In “Esquartejamento” Cabral links both patriarchal attitudes and the domination of nature to the rule of the market. “I continue to believe that capitalism is wrong” (68), the author says in an interview with Elzbieta Szoka that chimes in with her denunciation of the contemporary consumerist culture.²¹ In her grounded texts, inspired by the

proximity between human and non-human beings she experienced as a child in the Amazon, Cabral denounces the exploitation of plants and animals, as well as of some humans. She is not advocating for an essentialist connection between children, women and other living beings but merely drawing the attention of her readers to alternatives to the commodification of non-humans, which can be found at the margins and in the interstices of contemporary culture. She grounds her writings on the details of everyday existence of her childhood self, immersed in the Amazonian environment, as a springboard for a broader critique of the commodification of flora and fauna. Her texts on the ethics of food consumption are a stark reminder of the profound disconnect between humans, animals and plants, which lies at the root of the environmental catastrophe in which the world finds itself today.

Notes

¹ Research for this article was funded by a Grant from the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT), Project IF/00606/2015.

² This and all other quotes from primary sources in Portuguese are rendered in my translation. The translation appears in brackets after the original and the page numbers indicated refer to the citation in the original. Quotes from secondary sources are rendered only in translation, with page numbers referring to the original.

³ As Silva points out, “the discursive universe that predominated in Amazonian letters has been one of masculinization [...]: a discourse of homogenization, of totality, of linearity, of the conquest and domination of men and of nature, in various senses” (*Representações* 163).

⁴ As McNee writes, Cabral focuses “not on sublime, wilderness vistas but instead on small scenes where distinctions between human and nonhuman realms are blurred or visibly decaying” (56).

⁵ As Telles mentions, “the work of Astrid Cabral establishes in the context of the Madrugada poetry, a more intimist poetic diction that reveals a strong female sensibility (1).

⁶ Cabral dedicates her book *Visgo da Terra*, the poetry collection where she engages more directly with her life in the Amazon, to “my companions from the Club of Dawn” (*Déu* 157; “meus Companheiros do Clube da Madrugada”).

⁷ Cabral was born in Manaus and, after spending a brief period of her early life in Recife, she went back to the city of her birth where she completed her high school education. She then moved to Rio de Janeiro to study Romance Languages and, in 1962, she became a professor at the University of Brasilia. After the military coup in Brazil in 1964, Cabral had to leave her teaching position and joined the Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. She worked as a diplomat in the Middle East and in the USA. Cabral currently resides in Rio de Janeiro.

⁸ As a diplomat, Cabral travelled extensively. According to Graça, one can find “[t]wo main vectors in Cabral’s poetry: one that invests in interiority (personal and geographic) and another one that seeks to decipher the enigma of the outsider, be that countries, as in *Torna-Viagem* and *Rês Desgarrada*, or the threats of existence” (ix-x).

⁹ Frota notes that Cabral is “a master in carving out details out of everyday life, giving prosaic speech an intentional symbolic meaning” (402).

¹⁰ The Amazon has often been considered to be a “land without history,” in the well-known formulation of Euclides da Cunha (154). Earlier settlers and explorers saw the

region as a place of unspoilt and untouched nature, disregarding the large Indigenous presence in the area.

¹¹ The same focus on the lives of oranges, which are perceived as being out of place and divorced from their natural surroundings when they are served as part of a meal, can be found in the poem “Portal do Dia” (“Portal of the Day”): “Que fazem aqui as laranjas / emigradas das árvores? / Bem estariam nos galhos / escuros da madrugada / em vez do agressivo prato / de onde me encaram furtivas” (*Intramuros* 1; “What are the oranges doing here / emigrated from the trees? / They would be better in branches / dark from dawn / instead of lying in the aggressive plate / from where they gaze at me furtively”).

¹² See, for instance, Paco Calvo, Daniel Chamovitz, Anthony Trewavas, Peter Wohlleben, and Stephano Mancuso, among many others.

¹³ Lispector’s narrative is perhaps even more radical than Cabral’s poem, in that the protagonist of the former eats from the body of the dying cockroach, again in an allusion to Christianity and the Eucharist.

¹⁴ For a contextualization of the poem within the Western understanding of animals, see Cantarelli, “Todos Somos Animais.”

¹⁵ In the poem “O Peixe” (“The Fish”), Cabral also highlights the contrast between the live animal in its habitat and its reduction to a food item. The fish moves through its “reino de sombras / viajando no azul da inconsútil noite” when it is, all of a sudden “o azul o sequestra” (*Déu* 272; “kingdom of shadows / travelling in the blue of the seamless night;” “sequestered by the fishhook”). The cooked body of the animal stands as an uncomfortable reminder of the violence done to the fish: “No exílio da travessa, amortalhado / em rubro molho, nos julga e condena / com a ironia das pupilas cegas”

(Idem; “In the exile of the serving platter, its body shrouded / in red sauce, it judges and condemns us / with the irony of its blind pupils”).

¹⁶ For an in-depth discussion of both poems, see Cantarelli, “A Presença Animal.”

¹⁷ For a literary depiction of animal’s rights activists who compare the meat industry and meat consumption to the Holocaust, see J. M. Coetzee’s novel *Elizabeth Costello*.

¹⁸ See also the poem “Glosando minha Avó” (“Paraphrasing my Grandmother”), where Cabral describes a number of tasks that have traditionally been performed by women, including cleaning, sewing, cooking, etc. (*Intramuros* 19-20).

¹⁹ See Merchant and Plumwood for a cultural history of the links between women and the natural world in Western culture.

²⁰ In the poem “Rio Chicago” (“Chicago River”) Cabral deplores the fate of a river that saw its “curso amordaçado / por repressivo cimento” and its “margens mutiladas” “[v]iúvas de verdes praias,” thus becoming a “líquido cadáver jade” (*Déu* 352; “course gagged / by repressive cement;” “mutilated margins;” “[w]idowed of green beaches;” “liquid cadaver of jade”). Similarly, in “Yankee Garden,” the poet regrets the “paisagem programada” of a “selvagem” and is haunted by a nostalgia of “the wild” (374; “programmed landscape;” “*man made world*”).

²¹ The author says in the same interview: “I’m dying of fear about economic globalization, because I think that an economically interconnected world is worse off. A world of self-sufficient communities would be a lot better [...]. I’m strongly in favor of globalization in cultural terms, but not in economic terms.” (Szoka 71).

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