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**Title:** Inside the Whale: Configurations of An-other Female Subjectivity

“Original manuscript” of JOURNAL ARTICLE. Published in *Women’s Studies: An Inter-disciplinary Journal* 47.2 (2018): 160-172.

DOI: [10.1080/00497878.2018.1425579](https://doi.org/10.1080/00497878.2018.1425579)

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00497878.2018.1425579>

### **Abstract**

The posthumanist paradigm of the last three decades has brought about a transformation of what we understand as “human”, and its postanthropocentric proposals —common to posthumanist and ecocritical debates— have called for radical revisions of the relationship between culture and nature that may foster bonds of continuity between both (Braidotti and Dolphijn). This article focuses on the relationship of continuity between humans and animals in contemporary Irish and Galician poetry and, in particular, on the motif of the whale, as such continuity illustrates the emergent configurations of female subjectivity produced in these two Atlantic communities of Western Europe since the 1990s.

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### 1. Introduction

The posthumanist paradigm of the last three decades has brought about a transformation of what we understand as “human” (Braidotti *The Posthuman*), as its postanthropocentric proposals, which are common to posthumanist and ecocritical debates, have called for radical revisions of the relationship between culture and

nature that repudiate patterns of human domination over nature and foster bonds of continuity between both (Braidotti and Dolphijn). On their part, ecofeminist denunciations of androcentrism have unveiled the patriarchal interests behind the common exploitation and subordination of women and nature and have put forward alternative ideological approaches that range from spiritual to materialist propositions, from hallowed identifications of women and nature to the critical scrutiny of social constructions of gender and nature (Diamond and Orenstein xi; Gaard and Murphy 3-5).

In this article, I will focus on the relationship of contiguity between humans and animals in contemporary Irish and Galician (north-western Spain) poetry and, in particular, on the motif of the whale, as such contiguity illustrates the emergent configurations of female subjectivity produced in these two Atlantic communities of Western Europe since the 1990s.<sup>1</sup> I would like to suggest that contemporary literary configurations of human-animal contiguity generate notions of hybridity that differ substantially from the hybrid creatures of classical mythology which, according to Ferreira (43), functioned as cautionary tales to exemplify punishments and to warn of dangers. In the Irish and Galician poetry of the last three decades, however, there abound whales that fascinate the human observer and, in particular, a good number of female voices that express their desire to dwell inside the whale. These instances of hybridity and contiguity not only open up new perspectives on the interrelation of humans and animals but also raise pressing questions about our relationship with alterity. P.D. Murphy has argued that the rapport between humans and nature should not be based on an alienating radical difference, but on a relative difference that allows for mutual and respectful communication, a rapport not with an *Other* but with *an-other*: “relational difference and *anotherness* rather than

Otherness” (35). In line with Murphy’s proposal, I aim to show that contemporary uses of the motif of the whale advocate configurations of an-other female subjectivity and an-other liaison between woman and nature.

The conspicuous presence of whales in Irish and Galician literature may well be connected with the contact that these coastal countries have had with this marine mammal. Although the variety of cetaceans is broad, I will predominantly use “whale” as a generic term in this article because it is the most common name in the literary texts under analysis. Apart from a wide array of economic, social and cultural characteristics that have been common to Ireland and Galicia —such as, among others, the alleged Celtic background, the agrarian economy, the postcolonial import of debates about national identity and the vernacular language, the impact of the Catholic moral code on all aspects of life, and the unprecedented rise of women writers since the 1990s— these two countries had a whaling industry, with its highest peak in the twentieth century, that entailed hunting, cutting and processing the products that derived from cetaceans. In Galicia, whale hunting goes back to the Middle Ages, while in Ireland whale products were mainly obtained from beached cetaceans until a nascent whaling industry was established in Donegal Bay in the eighteenth century. However, it was the coast of county Mayo that developed a more robust whaling industry in the twentieth century (Ireland.net). The Irish government declared its territorial waters as a sanctuary for whales and dolphins in 1991, the first declaration of its kind in Europe (iwdg.ie). As for the Galician whaling industry, it had factories in the provinces of Lugo, A Coruña and Pontevedra, some of which were active until 1986 —year of the commercial whaling moratorium declared by the International Whaling Commission. Besides the meat, other products obtained from cetaceans in the

Galician whaling industry included oil, lubricants, margarine and fertilizers (Axena.org).

## 2. The Whale in Galician Poetry: Self-Affirmation and Vulnerability

Although the poetry under discussion in this article has been published after the 1986 commercial whaling moratorium, the motif of the whale is a potent one due both to the impact of the whaling industry on the population of the Galician coast and to the growing international awareness of the danger of extinction of some cetaceans. The conspicuous rise of women writers in this period will also allow me to ascertain if there is a differentiated use of the motif of the whale by male and female poets, as well as to weigh the repercussions of this motif for the rest of the literary field.

The whale has a compelling allegorical dimension in the titles of several poetry collections since the 1980s: *Baleas e baleas* [Whales and whales] (Castro 1988), *A rota dos baleeiros* [The whalers' route] (Alonso, Souto and Villar 1991), *A tribo das baleas. Poetas de arestora* [The tribe of whales. Poets of these times] (González 2001), *Balea2* [Whale2] (Creus 2011), *Carne de Leviatán* [Flesh of Leviathan] (Pato 2013), *no ventre da balea* [In the whale's belly] (Villar 2004). In spite of the salient position of the motif of the whale in the titles of these collections, it only features occasionally in the poems themselves —except in Creus's *Balea2*—, although it does so with outstanding symbolical value. The motif in the title acquires an allegorical dimension that relates the whale with the book as a whole and generates a marine imaginary of magnitude, potency, struggle and survival. In other collections, the motif of the whale is not part of the title, but features significantly in several poems: *Arden* [Burn] (Romaní 1998), e *Estremas* [Boundaries] (Romaní 2010). Lastly, there are other collections with just an

occasional, though forceful, use of the motif: *Elexías a Lola* [Elegies to Lola] (Torres 1980, 2016), *Poemas da cidade oculta* [Poems of the hidden city] (Creus 1996), *Calendario perpetuo* [Perpetual calendar] (Álvarez Caccamo 1997), *(nós, as inadaptadas)* [(us, the maladjusted)] (María do Cebreiro 2002), and *Desescribindo* [Unwriting] (Aleixandre 2016).

The “monstrosity” of the marine mammal has been identified as a suitable trope for the empowerment of Galician women writers, who are now seen as irrepressible navigators and explorers of new feminine subjectivities (González *Elas* 143). However, even though these notions of mobility and strength seem empowering enough, there may be some objections to this feminist appropriation of the trope at a time of whale decimation. Are we constructing a new female subjectivity at the cost of or regardless of the precarious situation of the whale? Could the endangered whale serve as an adequate figuration for women’s self-affirmation in an ecofeminist vindication when, as Ynestra King has claimed, nature should be the central category of ecofeminist analysis?

In ecofeminism, nature is the central category of analysis. An analysis of the interrelated dominations of nature —psyche and sexuality, human oppression, and nonhuman nature— and the historic position of women in relation to those forms of domination is the starting point of ecofeminist theory. (117)

About the concept of monstrosity —used by González (*Elas* 143) and Romaní (*Arden* 14) in reference to the whale— Jeffrey J. Cohen has made the following observations: the monster is the extreme version of marginalization, the embodiment of difference and an obstinate Other that we need to, though we cannot, domesticate. It provokes repulsion and attraction, anxiety and desire, as it arouses the pleasures of the body and welcomes us to worlds of fantasy free from

social norms. Cohen suggests that we can construe cultures from the monsters they produce and concludes that monsters are cultural products themselves that destabilize what we understand as human and thereby compel us to reassess our sense of difference. Regarding the whale as monster in contemporary Galician poetry, it is certainly a sign of difference and a stimulus for us to reconsider our relationship with alterity, the abject Other, corporeality and repressed desire. However, while Cohen argues that the monster is exclusively a cultural product, I would like to highlight the fact that the whale is both a natural creature and a sign that we interpret through a cultural code. If we circumscribe the whale, or any other natural being, exclusively within our cultural constructions, we will not be able to understand its difference, respect its autonomy, take heed of its needs, listen to its speaking voice and learn from the knowledge that it imparts. Ecocritic Sue Ellen Campbell maintains that it is not just the human being that formulates the signification of nature, since nature is also one of the external forces that shape us. Along a similar line, N. Katherine Hayles refers to “constrained constructivism” as the acknowledgement of the limitations that nature poses to each of our epistemological acts. Furthermore, in line with Patrick D. Murphy’s (5) understanding of the relative difference of nature, an ecofeminist approach to the trope of the whale would be expected to respect the whale’s alterity while defending its equal ontological status and rights. A postanthropocentric outlook on the relation of contiguity between woman and animal, and on the woman’s choice of the whale in her search for a hospitable space inside the animal will also reveal instances of hybridity that are characteristic of posthumanist discourses.

In her collection *Baleas e baleas*, Galician poet Luisa Castro gives a voice to the alienating experience of Galician seamen fishing off the coast of Ireland.

Hard and unjust labor conditions, illegal fishing practices, sexual frustration and alcoholism engender the array of tales, fantasies and laments of a lineage of seamen that we come across throughout the book. The second section of the collection, entitled “Os ventres das baleas” [The whales’ bellies], contains one particular poem that intertwines the grandfather’s tales about whales that hide whole continents in their bellies with a female adolescent’s rebellion against these male heroic narratives told by discredited fishermen. Among the options that the young protagonist has before her, there are these two: either to resort to the trope of the devouring whale of plundering ships or to identify with the whale in a common perception of vulnerability. The former motif, which González (*Elas* 146) has defined as the “satanic whale”, would correspond to a feminist appropriation of the patriarchal demonization of resistance so as to turn it into a tool of female empowerment. In the 1992 edition of this poem, the young protagonist waits inside the belly of the devouring whale in an act of self-defense against the fishermen who ingenuously take the whale for an island: “no ventre das baleas só resido eu / agardando a hora / de que atraquen os barcos” [in the whales’ bellies I’m the only dweller / waiting for the hour / when the ships will moor] (52-53). The first edition of this collection in 1988, however, does not convey so much a desire for struggle or revenge, but the exposure of the protagonist’s vulnerability: “no ventre das baleas só resido eu / con moitas cicatrices nos xionllos / de caer na cuberta cando amarran os barcos” [in the whales’ bellies I’m the only dweller / with many scars on my knees / after falling on the deck of the mooring ships] (45). The trope of the female wounded body abounds in contemporary Galician poetry as an acknowledgement of vulnerability that recalls Judith Butler’s (100) warning about the fallacy of the sovereign subject and her proposal of contingency and ontological

instability as an ethical resource that allows us to establish ties of reciprocity with the Other. A reading of Castro's poem as an inquiry into notions of interdependence and reciprocity between the young woman and the whale seems to concur with postanthropocentric and ecofeminist strategies that attempt to harmonize women's and animals' rights and subvert patriarchal narratives of pillage.

In her analysis of women poets' synecdoche of the whale's belly, Helena González (*Elas* 147) suggests that it is a privileged locus for the generation of utopian discourse and identifies in the whale's corporeality a trope for women's empowerment. A similar idea can be found in another Galician writer, Xohana Torres, who has sentenced: "Unha muller pode converterse en balea polo simple feito de querer cambiar de forma" [A woman can turn into a whale for the sake of wanting to change her shape] (17). Nevertheless, an epigraph with a quotation by Rosi Braidotti in Ana Romani's collection *Estremas* draws the limits of the utopian project: "As mulleres que anceian o cambio non poden mudar a súa pel como se fosen serpes" [Women who yearn for change cannot shed their skin as if they were snakes] (43). On the other hand, a poem such as the one that begins "No medio da praza /despezan os restos da balea" [In the middle of the square / they cut the remains of the whale] in Romani's collection *Arden* (13) cannot be reduced to a utopian understanding of the trope of the whale, since this would mean to ignore the responsibility of the Galician whaling industry in the extinction of several species of cetaceans. It seems paradoxical that the dissected whale can be seen as a sign of feminist self-affirmation, although the young bystander certainly identifies with the whale: "A balea non ten aletas! Mírase unha nena" [The whale has no fins! A girl regards herself] (13). Could women's empowerment ever go hand in hand with the extinction of the whale?: "a cría que nunca fecundou o espólio" [the



offspring that plunder never inseminated] (13). I would like to suggest an alternative reading of this poem with a focus on female and animal vulnerability. Romaní does not conceal the whale's vulnerability —“a vaíña do pánico” [the pod of panic], “confundiú” [confused], “regresión” [regression], “vista débil” [weak eyesight] “espanto” [fright]— and for this reason I advocate an interpretation of the poem that acknowledges androcentric decimation of cetaceans and shows the writer's and the female character's empathy towards the whale. This whale is a sign of relative difference or an-otherness, because the girl recognizes herself in it: “Por onde navegou mamífera a arqueoloxía da sombra? / A rapaza sorri: // ‘Por min mesma señores por min mesma’” [Where has the mammal sailed, this archeology of shade? / The girl smiles: // ‘Through myself gentlemen through myself’] (13).

Relative difference allows for spaces of communication, liminal zones of transition and contact, and these are also explored by Romaní in another collection, *Estremas* with the haunting Egyptian desert of Wadi Al-Hitan [Whale Valley] and its fossil Archaeoceti in their evolution from land-based animals to ocean-going cetaceans. It is this spatial and evolutionary liminality that challenges boundaries: “Un ventre ensimesmado de osamentas / esculca a furia /debanda extremas” [A self-absorbed belly of bones / scans the fury / unravels boundaries] (9). Metamorphosis is also a privileged topic in Marilar Aleixandre's poetry. Trained as a biologist, this Galician poet identifies the woman writer, always a stranger and always out of place, with the mammal that abandons the trite routes on land and enters the sea: “... rexeitada polos cuadrúpedes / esqueiroada da touza de peixes” [rejected by quadrupeds / shunned by the shoal of fish] (19). As the title of Aleixandre's collection implies —*Desescribindo* [Unwriting]—, only through this process of

estrangement and transgression of boundaries will the woman writer learn to un-write poetry.

The references to the whales' bellies, found in Castro, María do Cebreiro and Román (*Estremas*), are of necessity related to the motif of devouring, feeding, nourishing and starving. This is of special interest because of the attention paid by women writers since the 1980s to the topic of eating disorders like anorexia, and it evinces a divergent approach from that in traditional narratives such as Jonah's story in the *Bible* or the traditional tale of *Pinocchio*. In Castro's *Baleas e baleas*, the grandfather tells the story of the lurking whale which swallows the unsuspecting fishermen, while in contradistinction the rebellious adolescent woman refuses to eat: "dilles que non quero máis, que teño abondo / que son fermosa así" [tell them I don't want any more, that I've had enough / that I am beautiful like this] (70). In María do Cebreiro's collection (*nós, as inadaptadas*) schoolgirls learn patriarchal narratives that lump woman and whale together as the abject Other: "Qué falta de decoro, agora si, comparar a nosa efixie diminuta co ventre das baleas" [What a lack of decorum, indeed, to compare our minute effigy to the whales' bellies] (39). Unsurprisingly, one of the girls "morreu delgadaña" [died skinny] (39), and looked as if she had "unha solitaria na barriga" [a tapeworm in her belly] (41). Chus Pato's *Carne de Leviatán* is indebted to the figuration of the Leviathan in Jewish mythology that is served at a banquet. Pato's Leviathan is similarly served to women artists to endow them with the capacity to create new shapes and forms.

The hunt of the whale is liable to bring forth an epic imaginary of male heroism and the question rises as to the use that contemporary male writers make of this motif (González *Elas* 162). The collection *A rota dos baleeiros* by Fran Alonso, Francisco Souto e Miro Villar draws inspiration from this hunting activity

and its enterprising and hazardous nature but turns it into an artistic quest, by the aspiring writers, for the metaphorical whale of creativity in the oceans of the mind. In spite of the allegorical tenor of the hunting motif, an ecocritical perspective is likely to find it disturbing in the present-day context of endangerment of cetaceans. Another Galician poet, Xosé María Álvarez Cáceamo, renders memories of whaling times in Galicia, but swathes the motif of hunting in a dismal atmosphere of poverty, decadence and cowardice: “[...] e se escoita un rumor de superficie enferma, escurísimo brado de estómago animal, avisos de pobreza e laios vergoñentos” [... and one hears a whisper of sick surface, the darkest bellow of animal gut, warnings of poverty and shameful laments] (90). There is no room for the epic here, since this is the chronicle of a collective defeat.

Among the male poets, Estevo Creus is the one with a use of the whale motif that has a recurrence, intensity and significance that is akin to that in women’s poetry. The whale appears in the title of his collection *Balea2* as well as in most of its poems, but can also be found in previous collections such as *Poemas da cidade oculta* and *Areados* [Sanded]. *Poemas da cidade oculta*—published a decade after the whale hunting moratorium—begins with a poem that is highly relevant to the posthumanist debate, as the poet presents a lyric subject that is inhabited by an animal: “A min e non a ti / mordeume de neno unha balea / e no espiral do ADN/ mesturóseme a dolor con tres pasos e tres golpes” [I, and not you, / was bitten as a child by a whale / and in my DNA helix / pain was mixed up with three steps and three blows] (*Poemas* 10). The specialist in bioethics, Julian Savulescu, poses the question as to whether transgenesis and, in particular, the human-animal chimera can improve or endanger the human species (22). From a poetic point of view, we could answer that this type of transgenesis reveals that an-

other that we have inside us. Julia Kristeva suggests that, if we acknowledge and accept the other we have inside us, we will be able to acknowledge and accept the other outside us (9). Transgenesis in this poem by Creus highlights the animal inside us, an animal that embodies the instinctive, imaginative and creative force of poetry. Transgenesis, I would like to suggest, entails the coexistence with the other, the contiguity of human and animal, and the instability of boundaries. As a trope, transgenesis favors the reflection upon identity and the relation with both the cultural and natural other. The motif of whale hunting also serves Creus to denounce the acculturation of Galician people. Far from the epic rhetoric of male heroism and defeat of the whale, Creus correlates the extinction of whales and the decimation of minoritized languages: “destrozarlle os ollos / quitarlle a canción / esquecer a lingua” [smash its eyes / steal the song / forget the language] (*Poemas* 63). Creus’s later collection, *Balea2*, interrogates the reduction of living beings to mere linguistic constructs and presents corporeality as the adamant manifestation of the real. Creus proposes a non-utilitarian and non-aestheticist contemplation of nature and denounces the spectacularization that turns natural beings into a commodity of the show business and of the capitalist delirium of unlimited growth: “tantas e tantas casas / construíron no areal / por ir ver nadar baleas / que xa non vén ningunha / que xa non / ven” [so many and so many houses / were built on the sand strip / for the contemplation of whales / that no whale comes any longer / they no longer see] (*Balea2* 38). Creus advocates the urgency to put ourselves in the place of the other, learn from the other, and break free from what he calls our “egcosystem” (*Balea2* 4). The whales’ problems become the lyric subject’s problems in a manifestation of empathy that vindicates the affects as an aesthetic principle.

### 3. The Whale in Irish Poetry: Beached Whales and Hospitable Bellies

I would like to start this section with a reminder of the reasons for a comparative study of Galician and Irish poetry like the present one. Given the gender focus of this article, the first notable feature to mention is the unprecedented rise of women writers in both communities since the 1980s thanks to the fertile ground prepared by feminist movements in the previous decade, and as a result of other social changes, such as women's access to university, which improved their learning and self-confidence. The conspicuous incorporation of women writers certainly brought about changes in both literary systems regarding themes, tropes, subjectivities and forms, and revived debates about national, religious and gender identity (Palacios and González, Palacios and Lojo).

Regarding the relationship between literature and nature, there seems to be in Ireland a less anxious perception of the ecological crisis than the one we find in Galicia. Nevertheless, contemporary Irish poetry registers a growing concern with global warming, species endangerment and landscape deterioration (Palacios and Nogueira). The motif of the whale in Irish poetry deserves a comparative analysis due to the participation of Ireland and Galicia in the whaling industry —although the Irish involvement was of a smaller scale— and also for the growing ecological concern with the endangerment of this animal. Although the figuration of the whale is less prominent in Irish writing, we find a number of examples of great evocative power and relevance to women's studies. I will thereby select for analysis those texts that better prompt a dialogue with the Galician poems discussed above.

In Doireann Ní Ghríofa's "Baleen", the lyric subject is a woman who recalls how, on the thirteenth anniversary of her birth, she changed her childhood clothes for the adult attire. The description of the new clothes actually allows us to situate

the poem in the nineteenth century, since one of the garments is the whalebone corset that used to be made with baleen —keratin plates in whales’ jaws which catch the fish or plankton as the whale feeds. Accordingly, this poem raises the topics of the female body, the whale, transgenesis, the belly, and feeding, apart from the important theme of homoerotic desire. The baleen, which serves the purpose of feeding the whale, becomes, paradoxically, a second skeleton that constricts the woman’s waist:

Now, each morning, a girl assembles my second skeleton  
piece by piece, suspends it over my narrow person,  
tightens the corset of whalebone that constricts  
the curve of my ribs. (33)

The hunting of the marine mammal goes hand in hand with the oppression of the woman’s body, and the figurative transgenesis consists here in the superposition of skeletons. The poem also connects corporeality and homoeroticism —“I want her to touch my face” (33) — both potentially transgressive and, therefore, socially regulated. The rest of the poem includes other relevant issues such as: the beached whale, human puzzlement before the whale’s anomalous behavior, the whale as a monster, woman’s desire to enter the whale’s belly and the whale’s belly as a hospitable *room of her own*. The beached whale is not a rare motif in Irish literature and is often accompanied by the expression of human perplexity as to the causes and consequences of this accident: “a whale beached in crumpled newsprint / men pointing, puzzling over how to dispose of it” (33). Since ancient times, beached whales used to be exploited when fresh, but in Ní Ghríofa’s poem the question is how to get rid of it. The expression “puzzle over” is pertinent to ecocriticism, as this field of inquiry considers nature to be a speaking subject that we, humans, do

not listen to or fail to understand (Murphy 12). However, the men in this poem are not wondering about the message conveyed by the stranded whale or the lesson that can be learnt from this situation; they simply want to remove the whale. The gender focus of this poem is important because it contrasts these men's attitude with the female characters' desire to enter the whale's belly: "to roll into the monstrous mouth of a whale and twist / themselves through baleen and whale-spit" (33). The belly becomes a space of sorority—"dozens of ladies", "we stood together" (33)—and a hospitable space to homoerotic desire.

The motifs of the stranded whale and of nature as a speaking subject are also dealt with in "Pilots", a poem from *The State of the Prisons* by the Northern Irish poet Sinéad Morrissey which is set in Belfast Lough—presented here as a dystopic and severely polluted scenario. The disoriented whales enter this intertidal sea inlet while spectators gather to watch the phenomenon in puzzlement. The poetic persona implies that the whales have a message to communicate with their unusual behavior but humans fail to understand it: "some dismal chorus of want and wistfulness / resounding around the planet, alarmed and prophetic / with all the foresight we lack" (14). In contrast to other Galician poems with an allegorical understanding of the whale motif, Morrissey's has a stronger ecological import, although her critique of the spectacularization of the whale is comparable to that posed by Estevo Creus in his collection *Balea2*: "Children sighed when they dived, then clapped as they rose / again, Christ-like and shining, from the sea, though they could have been / dying out there" (Morrissey *The State* 15).

The stranded whale also features in Victoria Kennefick's collection *White Whale*, which begins with a poem entitled "Beached Whale" in which the poetic persona's childhood memory of a rotting whale on a beach is intertwined with the

recollection of her mother crying on seeing her disfigured body on a mirror. Once again, we find in this poem the spectators' awkward reaction to the beached whale: "and the mute open mouths of the many onlookers" (7), and over again we come across the theme corporeality facilitated by the whale motif, and the identification of mother and whale as time disfigures their bodies: "the stale smell of a thousand tides", "the scars of our arrivals barely healed after all this time" (7). The whale, whether as a trope or in reference to the real animal, comes up in the rest of the poems of this collection, but one in particular, "White Whale", stands out among the rest for its demystification of the *Moby Dick* heroic narrative. The poem is again about a childhood memory of the poetic persona, though this time it recalls the child's visit, with her father, to the coastal town of Youghal, Co. Cork, where John Huston filmed his adaptation of Melville's novel in 1954. The poem constitutes an anti-heroic account of the characters/actors and the setting/décor. Nothing is what it appears to be: the whale of the novel is now a camouflaged barge, the town of Bedford in Massachusetts is replaced by the Irish town of Youghal, etc.: "They made-do with a barge concealed / by a hump, back, fin and tail. / The Captain hunted this for leagues" (25). This anti-heroic stance is probably one of the most salient characteristics of Irish women poets' rewriting of the whale motif.

Herman Melville's novel is also a meaningful reference in Caitríona O'Reilly's collection *The Sea Cabinet*, where a quotation from *Moby Dick* features as the initial epigraph of the book. The blinding light of the Albino whale described in the novel is the motif chosen by O'Reilly to open her collection, while the poem "The Whale" certifies the animal's extinction: "The whale on which their world depended // is elsewhere, free of history..." (44). The hunters have decimated the whale and, concomitantly, their own means of living, so whales and whaling are



now mere exhibits in the Hull Maritime Museum in England. The poem thereby provides a poignant and incisive description of the museum exhibits in relation to the whale: myths, nomenclature, classifications of species, bones on display, recordings of whale songs, maps of whaling routes, hunting practices and commercial exploitation.

Though the motif of the whale is not so conspicuous in contemporary Irish poetry as in its Galician counterpart, there is one particular poem by a male writer, Peter Sirr, about the ecosystem that is formed around the skeleton of a whale that lies on the ocean floor. "Whalefall" is a poem included in the collection *Twenty Irish Poets Respond to Science in Twelve Lines* and its interest for ecocriticism lies in the attention paid to a natural medium of abyssal waters that is free from human interference, as well as in the impersonal tone that focuses exclusively on nature, regardless of the observer and his/her gender. However, in her analysis of the narrator's impersonality in naturalist writing, Suzanne Clark argues that, as late as the 1970s, women could not access the "status of the disinterested" (155), as they were considered to be the object of knowledge, and not its impersonal and objective subject. Therefore, the impersonal scrutiny of the whale fall in this poem raises questions about cultural constructions of the observer's gender.

#### 4. Concluding remarks

In this analysis of the literary motif of the whale in contemporary Irish and Galician poetry, I have paid special attention to the dyad woman-whale as a compelling figuration for an emergent construction of female subjectivity. I have pondered its potential for feminist self-affirmation, but have concurrently taken heed of the ecocritical advocacy of nature as the central category of analysis. Androcentric exploitation and oppression of both women and nature have inadvertently generated

hybrid figurations of women-whales that privilege the whale's belly as a hospitable space to foster alternative and subversive female subjectivities. However, I have contrasted allegorical readings of the trope of the whale as a sign of feminist empowerment with a more ecological concern for the decimation of the whale and the responsibility of the Irish and, above all, Galician whaling industries in this plunder. The hybrid figuration of woman-whale reveals the mutual construction of human and non-human nature, their relation of contiguity and interdependence, and their relative, rather than radical and alienating, difference. This relation of otherness encompasses the needs and rights of both women and nature with more equitable discourses and practices.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Acknowledgement: This article has been completed as part of the research projects "Eco-Fictions. Emergent Discourses on Women and Nature in Ireland and Galicia" (*Ministerio de Economía y Competitividad / ERDF, FEM2015-66937-P*) and "Discourse and Identity" (Xunta de Galicia, GRC2015 / 002 GI-1924), which are hereby gratefully acknowledged.

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