

2020

Outperformed: Exploration and Comparison of the Tongue-And-Cheek Tragedies of Women-Animal Relationships in Selected Short Stories by Samanta Schweblin and in Apichatpong Weerasethakul's Film, Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives

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Recommended Citation

Smith, Sawnie (2020) "Outperformed: Exploration and Comparison of the Tongue-And-Cheek Tragedies of Women-Animal Relationships in Selected Short Stories by Samanta Schweblin and in Apichatpong Weerasethakul's Film, Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives," *Vernacular: New Connections in Language, Literature, & Culture*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/vernacular/vol5/iss1/6>

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Cover Page Footnote

Acknowledgment: I am indebted to the intellectual stimulus and freedom offered to me by my Spanish-language literature supervisor at Oxford, Dr. Olivia Vazquez-Medina. She has created a space for me within my graduate studies where I am encouraged to be explorative in my interests. I also must thank my friends and family for listening to me talk about such disquieting topics as those explored in this article without so much as batting an eyelash. They never swam away from me.

Outperformed: Exploration and Comparison of the Tongue-And-Cheek Tragedies of Women-Animal Relationships in Selected Short Stories by Samanta Schweblin and in Apichatpong Weerasethakul's Film, *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*

“Neither shalt thou lie with any beast to defile thyself therewith: neither shall any woman stand before a beast to lie down thereto: it is confusion.”

(Leviticus 18:23, *King James Bible*)

I. Strange Bedfellows: Girl Meets Fish(man) on page and on screen¹

In Thai director Apichatpong Weerasethakul's award-winning 2010 film, *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*, a living catfish sexually gratifies a human woman. Why emphasize the catfish's vitality, its presence within the moving, animate world? Such emphasis makes relevant questions of agency and impulse that percolate through the spaces of comparison that this essay seeks to carve out between Argentine author Samanta Schweblin's characterization of women-animal relationships in a selection of her short stories and this scene from Weerasethakul's film that pairs human woman and catfish in an act of sexual intimacy. Returning to description of this film scene: the human woman (a Thai princess, in fact) of Weerasethakul's film does not manipulate a dead or “unwilling” catfish like some sort of monstrous sex toy near and around her genitalia or other erogenous zones.² On the contrary, the catfish swims *toward her* (the woman, at this point, has waded into the closed waters that the catfish inhabits and begun to float), right into the fleshy arc of her splayed, floating legs. It is a startling spectacle, one that elicits from the viewer a disconcerting admixture of horror and disgust, but also awe and curiosity—those last two, no doubt, reflexively eliciting their own added layer of creeping, unshakable shame. How to reconcile the preternaturalness of the act with the at-once-pinched, at-once-gaping grimace of pleasure that washes over the woman's face

as the catfish thrashes and splashes (knowingly) between her bare legs, performing its “cunnilingual” water dance? What is to be learned from this “interspecial, aquatic-erotic liaison” about human perceptions of nonhuman animals and the latter’s carnal potency (Utterson 235)? And what is contributed to the atmosphere of this film by this brief, but very active union between land-dweller and sea-dweller? By those contorted expressions of *female* pleasure that seem to fill up the entire frame? Finally, what is the underlying or explicit comedic value of this cross-species union, if any? And *who* would and should be able to laugh at such a spectacle?

The film, like others by Weerasethakul, unfolds within and among the lush tropics of the Isan region of northeastern Thailand, near the border with Laos. In her 2004 essay, “*Tropical Malady*: Film and the Question of the Uncanny Human-Animal,” Barbara Creed claims (within her analysis of an earlier film by Weerasethakul, *Tropical Malady*) that the jungled landscapes of Weerasethakul’s films, dense with vegetation, are “surreal places where consciousness and unconsciousness are as inextricably entwined” (131). They are “uncanny zones of topicality where human and animal merge” (131). This unforgettable image of woman and catfish engaged in erotic flesh-to-flesh contact is nestled somewhere in the middle of the film’s two-hour running time. Importantly, for the purposes of this essay, the princess’s decision to step into the waters inhabited by this talented sea-creature is framed as one filled with trepidation *and* the possible result of an upsetting, erotically-charged encounter with one of her palanquin-bearers. That is to say, the princess’s interaction with this catfish could be conceived of as a method by which she assuages (or is cleansed of) the emotional wounds inflicted upon her by this young, mortal man. In the catfish’s waters, she is baptized into a world of pleasure.

To substantiate this claim, an expanded description of the vignette’s narrative paces is called for. In brief, the vignette opens with an ornately dressed Thai princess being transported

through the dense flora of a jungle within the confines of an ornate palanquin that is carried by a retinue of uniformly-outfitted men. This royal woman will later find herself sitting alone on the banks of a small body of water in a clearing. This moment of solace or contemplation is interrupted when one of her young palanquin-bearers, a lithe man, joins her in the clearing. The spectator recognizes this palanquin-bearer as the same member of her retinue who earlier sought to peer behind the gauzy curtains of the traveling box in an effort to catch of a glimpse of the princess. What transpires between the princess and the palanquin-bearer is a subtle dance of rebuffs and encouragements, or rather a bitter imbroglio of bodily expectations. Finally, when the young man feels the princess has granted him sufficient access to her person, he confidently strides toward her. He then brusquely takes her into his arms, peels back layers of her finery, and plants a heavy kiss on her mouth. The princess's body initially stiffens under his mouth, only softening with time. But after a few seconds, the two locked in this same angular embrace, she pulls away. Her station grants her the authority to reject him.³ But the anguish of this confused, possibly assaultive embrace is multi-directional and palpable. Hurt contorts the features of both faces.

The palanquin-bearer takes his leave. The young man's lean figure is re-engulfed into the waxy thicket of the jungle, this endless green. And the princess crouches down once more by the water's edge and begins to sob quietly. It is at this moment—the imprint of the palanquin-bearer's fingers likely still visible on the surface of the princess's skin—that a *disembodied* male voice cuts through the insect thrum of the jungle. Both spectator and princess will shortly learn, though, that this voice belongs to a catfish that inhabits the small body of water in this clearing. He is not a ghost, as the princess initially assumes. "I am not a ghost. I am a catfish," he states matter-of-factly.⁴ The catfish then claims credit for an earlier illusion, another integral element of

this cinematic vignette, wherein he morphs the princess's reflection on the surface of his waters into that of a much younger, more smoothly-boned woman. "She [the young woman] seems to have everything I don't," laments the princess. "Most women don't have what you have," retorts the catfish. "But they have love..." she responds in a small, crestfallen voice. She is not met with an answer from the catfish. It appears that he has swum away.

"Come back!" shouts the princess. Wasting little time, the princess sets foot in the lake. Her movements emanate both this same trepidation, but also yearning. As she wades further—the water level climbing to reach her bosom—, she sheds layers of clothing and heavy gold jewelry. She reaches a state of undress more complete than that achieved by the palanquin-bearer's forceful hands. "Will you turn my body white and pretty like that reflection?" she asks, her voice bouncing across the surface of the lake. "These are my offerings. For you, lord of the water, to whom I am so grateful." She tilts her head, eventually allowing her whole body to bob to the surface of the water. Facing the sky, and with closed eyes and gently parted legs, the princess (expectantly) pulls back her wet skirts. Her floating body then begins to vigorously lurch back and forth in the water. Her face adopts this aforementioned grimace of pleasure, and her hands form claws that jut out of the water. Only when the camera pans down to her semi-nude legs are the viewer's suspicions confirmed. The sleek, ribbed tail of the catfish is shown flapping and flopping in the space between her legs—the face of the catfish pointed toward her genitalia. The vignette fades into an underwater flurry of whiskered, obsidian-colored catfish, bubbles, and entangled jewelry glinting among the plant life.

Samanta Schweblin is an Argentine author known for her literary evocations of the sinister and the uncanny. Much like Weerasethakul's film, Schweblin's short stories abound with deeply troubling, deceptively straightforward, and yet wonderfully meaty consideration of

possible and impossible relationships that take shape between nonhuman and human animals: schoolchildren metamorphose into perilously fragile butterflies or begin to swallow and consume living birds; young women swap family histories and seductive, seaside caresses with sensitive mermen; and unremarkable men leading unremarkable lives are tasked with beating stray dogs to death in order to gain entry into shadowy crime syndicates. Many of Schweblin's short stories that boast this "animal imagery" also explore the towering analytical realms of gender(ed) politics and gender(ed) agency. And argued for throughout the remainder of this essay is the view that there exists subversive and thought-provoking substance lurking beneath the eerie glaze of all of her animal stories, which echoes that which Weerasethakul accomplishes in his princess-catfish scene. In fact, both this Argentine author and this Thai filmmaker's respective imaginings of woman-animal relationships convey one particular message that is the primary point of interest for this essay: the *potential* for *female* pleasure, bliss, and acceptance is found in women's contact with the "less-than-human," with (demi-) animals. No doubt, the most provocative element of Weerasethakul's film scene is not the erotic union of woman and fish, *per se*. Rather, it is the extraordinary visual and auditory confirmation of *pleasure*—the consequence of the catfish's "performance"—that overcomes the princess. And as stated previously, these bodily contortions of female pleasure fill the screen. With this in mind, that the catfish should speak with a male voice and perform a seemingly anthropomorphic sex act with purpose is all the more ironic and biting (no pun intended).⁵

Section II of this essay argues that two of Schweblin's short stories, "Olingiris" and "El hombre sirena," both found in the 2017 collection of Schweblin's short stories, *Pájaros en la boca*, toy with the notion of "outperformance." Comedic value, as well as its transgressive potential, is encapsulated within and achieved through a series of questions generated by both

Weerasethakul's princess-catfish scene and the narrative happenings of Schweblin's short stories: What if a nonhuman animal marked as male could outperform a human male sexually? What if the *promise* of corporeal pleasure and release of the erotic variety *for women* was found swimming in the ocean, or even grazing near a barn? With regard to this notion of outperformance and its relevance to questions surrounding literary explorations of inter-species unions, investigative inspiration is taken from Holly Dugan's essay, "Aping Rape: Animal Ravishment and Sexual Knowledge in Early Modern England," found in the 2013 publication, *Sex before Sex: Figuring the Act in Early Modern England*. Dugan's essay explores the ironic reification of the heteronormativity of sexual violence in early modern England via the epoch's socio-literary fixation with "ape rape:" a "pervasive cultural belief in interspecies rape of human females by male apes" (213). But this essay demonstrates more focused interest in the notion of "aping," introduced by Dugan (within her same essay) and integral to her analysis of Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*. Dugan underscores the "eerie verisimilitude" between humans and other simians that has given rise to this notion of aping, which she describes as both a "subject and a verb" that disorients "human subjectivity, sexual knowledge, and species boundaries" (217-218).

The notion of aping is complex and its possible applications multiple. But for the purposes of this essay, aping could be understood as mimicry with results, *effective* mimicry. This essay is interested in, consequently, Dugan's claims that there was and likely still is something uniquely disturbing for (human) men about the notion of a male ape raping a (human) woman. Dugan points towards anxieties surrounding "diminished human male action" (281). Put simply (and not without a dose of needed humor): How are men to keep women in check if they alone cannot brandish the threat of rape at any time? How is the primacy of men ensured, if not

through the violent “anytime-ness” of forced penetration from their (our) species alone? Can non-simians perform or participate in aping? If so, does the catfish emasculate the palanquin-bearer with the former’s ability to elicit pleasure from the princess?

Existing both in tandem, and seemingly in conflict, with this notion of aping is arguably the most cited and explored narrative corpus of human-animal interaction: Greco-Roman mythology, made relevant within the confines of this essay because of the decidedly mythic or fanciful imagery of both the film vignette and Schweblin’s short stories. These myths of the Greco-Roman tradition are replete with interspecies unions of a much wider zoological scope—both sexual and otherwise. And populating these myths are also literal assemblages of human and animal parts, proto-Frankensteins (i.e. centaurs and satyrs). So often, these stories involve male deities metamorphosing into an animal so as to ravish (read: rape) what are described as lithe and beautiful young women who are unaware of the animal-in-question’s divinity. On the other hand, these male proto-Frankensteins—most often centaurs and satyrs—arrested in a state of semi-metamorphosis, need not alter their bodies further to enact sexual violence against women of fully human bodies.⁶

This essay argues that Schweblin’s short stories are able to reorient, poke fun at, and also modernize both this notion of aping and the imagery or mythic atmosphere of Greco-Roman myths of bestial rape, largely because the central anxiety underpinning both literary evocations of aping *and* these myths of bestial rape is the same: how is male dominance expressed, perpetuated, and maintained through the metaphorization of sex, its boundaries, and the identity of its participants (Robson 65)? It is important to bear in mind that the nonhuman animals committing the ravishments in these myths of bestial rape—the swan who lies with Leda, the

snake that coils around Dryope's body, or the white bull that carries Europa away—are *male* gods in disguise, anthropomorphic divinities in (literal) sheep's clothing.

Humor is tinged, however, with despair. The tongue-in-cheek cleverness of these (potentially) pleasurable animal outperformances is circumscribed by melancholy awareness in both the princess-catfish scene and in Schweblin's short stories, of that which J. E. Robson argues in his book chapter, "Bestiality and Bestial Rape in Greek Myth," found in the book of collected essays, *Rape in Antiquity* (1997). For Robson, the most prominent lesson to be gleaned from these myths of bestial rape, and arguably the most primordial for the ancient Greeks, is the primacy of men and the concomitant inferiority of women. His assertion that these myths of bestial rape illustrate the extent to which "there is no escape from male control" takes on the quality of an ideological refrain, dictating the tempo of Schweblin's work (77). And while both Weerasethakul's visually and narratively mythic vignette and Schweblin's selected short stories—the latter of which are shot through with equally potent but less overtly sexual undercurrents—put forth imaginings of women-animal unions that endorse female fulfillment, such fulfillment is either temporary or illusive. The zoological or species incompatibility between male, nonhuman animal and woman (these "terrain-crossed" lovers) in both the film vignette and the short stories proves insurmountable, even within the mythic or surreal logic of these literary and cinematic universes. But this is perhaps an intentional choice on the part of both Schweblin and Weerasethakul. For it proves an equally ironic but less humorous indictment of the patriarchal scheme that the men populating both these universes profess when they profess to respect or care for the women of these stories. The princess enters the catfish's waters with skin not only covered in the rough touch of the palanquin-bearer's hands, but also with ears filled with this same young man's only words to her: "You're the same person I've always revered."

Section II includes description of both relevant short stories by Schweblin: “El hombre sirena” and “Olingiris,” and seeks to illustrate the various ways by which these short stories thematically, visually, and ideologically commune with the princess-catfish scene of *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*. That is to say, this section seeks to evince the dark humor of these short stories. But it is also this section’s intention to acknowledge the ecosystem of gender(ed) violence and control—very much operative both in the film vignette and in the short stories—as that which not only renders necessary but also makes possible these feminist streaks of acerbity. More in-depth reference to both Robson’s and Dugan’s respective essays is made within this section, so as to substantiate various claims put forth. Finally, it is also suggested in this section that the women populating Schweblin’s literary universes are very much aware of their place(s) within this ecosystem, their *manmade* niche(s). Weerasethakul’s princess does not hesitate in formulating her response to the palanquin-bearer’s adulations. “That’s an illusion too,” she returns flatly.

II. The Last Laugh: Women and the Ephemeral Pleasures of Nonhuman Animals

Schweblin’s “El hombre sirena” is a curious story, spanning a brief five pages. It opens with an unnamed woman sitting in a seaside bar, awaiting her brother, Daniel. All the while she is watched by el Tano, the owner of the bar and a friend of the brother. It is from her vantage point in this establishment that she spots a merman by the dock—“tan hombre de la cintura para arriba, tan sirena de la cintura para abajo” (99). She finds herself lured down to the beachfront by this arresting figure that she describes as “macizo” and “musculoso” and filled with “tantas ganas de hablarle” (99). In fact, she feels it important to note the extent to which *this* merman’s body differs from those stock images of a merman that most assuredly (for the woman-protagonist) have taken root in the minds of most: “Contra la idea que se tiene de las sirenas, hermosas y

bronceadas, este no solo es del otro sexo sino que es bastante pálido” (99). Considerable preoccupation with the body is established within the linguistically-economic first paragraph. Schweblin also succeeds, within this succinct opening, in fleshing out the psychological contours of her protagonist’s existence with remarkable nuance. She is a grown woman. But one that is watched, minded, and reprimanded like a child by the men populating *her* narrative. For example, there is something vaguely condescending or infantilizing in el Tano’s insistence that the woman remain seated in the bar, concerned as he is that she will be absent when her brother arrives. More interestingly, this nameless woman seems to betray no fear or bafflement when confronted with the affable merman—who also happens to be staring at her from his vantage point down by the pier, another set of male eyes blinking themselves into existence in her world. Rather, the woman-protagonist lingers on the merman’s body language, convinced that the cross-armed posture he adopts as she walks toward him is “demasiado canchero para un hombre sirena” (99).

The conversation between woman and fishman begins with a simple “hola.” But that which proceeds is an odd, overly earnest, sexually charged, seaside therapy session, wherein the woman confesses to experiencing deep discontentment in her life. Namely, she expresses distress or frustration with her brother’s overbearing, patronizing, and paranoid presence: “—Me alquila una casita a unas cuadras: cree [the brother] que este barrio es mucho más seguro. Y se hace amigos por acá, habla con los vecinos, con el Tano, quiere saber todo, controlar todo, es realmente insoportable” (101). The merman attempts to commiserate. “—Mi padre era así,” he insists (101). But she pushes back, asserting the differences in their circumstances, “—Sí, pero él no es papá. Papá está muerto, ¿por qué tengo que soportar un papá-hermano si papá está muerto?” (101). A few beats of dialogue later, the two embrace. The paragraph that details their

kiss is rather extraordinary, a deep dive into the beginning and end of this woman's desperation to be transported out of her brother-dominated life, even if she should find herself unable to breath in the home of her deliverer-from-evil:

Le doy un beso y siento el frío de su boca despertar cada célula de mi cuerpo, como una bebida helada en pleno verano. No es solo una sensación, es una experiencia reveladora, porque siento que ya nada puede ser igual. Aunque no puedo decirle que lo amo: no todavía...Pero la decisión está tomada, es irrevocable. (102)

With this description of "El hombre sirena," some sort of highlighting of the overt network of male control—this chain of male eyes, which girdles the woman-protagonist's existence—has been sought. Like the Thai princess, she is on borrowed time with her aquatic scene partner and romantic interest. The story concludes with Daniel pulling up in his car to fetch his sister. Only moments before Daniel's arrival, the woman shares this exhilarating kiss with the merman, prompting him to promise her, rather cloyingly, that she need not suffer anymore now that he has entered her life. "—No sufras más, morocha, ya nadie va a hacerte daño" (102). This promise proves difficult to keep. Despite (empty, but spirited) protestations, the woman gets into the car with her brother and remarks on how inhospitable this world seems for "alguien como yo" (103). As is also suggested with later description and analysis of "Olingiris," there seems to be understanding on the part of the women in both Weerasethakul and Schweblin's works of that which is at stake in the extended version of Robson's afore-cited quote: "...since there is no escape from male control, a woman might as well submit in an appropriate context, that is, within the context of the *mores* of human society and the city-state. Resistance to sexuality can lead to social exclusion" (77). Women of both the contemporary and the mythic variety are

ensnared, preyed upon, within the same elaborate psychosexual hunt that underpinned the moral matrix of ancient Greece.

But given the at-large objective of this essay, critical is the line of argumentation that recognizes that Schweblin and Weerasethakul, with their respective re-imaginings or re-castings of woman-animal unions, have cleverly and damningly inversed and distorted the systems of signification operative in these Greco-Roman myths. Robson argues in his respective essay that women of the mythic variety risked social exclusion, veritable pariah status, if they resisted these bestial, sexual assaults (this zoologically expanded interpretation of ape rape). Rape was conceived of as a gendered taming tactic and a narrative motif that sought to represent that which women must endure (or “take in”), the totality of a male-dominated society, should they wish to remain in this same society’s good graces. Now, burst forth from the contemporary imaginations of Schweblin and Weerasethakul, the (demi-) animals that swim up to these lonely women, the Thai princess and the woman-protagonist of “El hombre sirena,” offer momentary escape from the quotidian tyranny of their (the women’s) male-dominated lives through carnal stimulation. Both Schweblin’s and Weerasethakul’s works effectively peel back the layers of sheep’s clothing that have long concealed the true identity of those committing these ravishments, or rather, the identity of those who have stood to benefit from these ennobled representations of rape: not wolves, but mortal men.⁷ But the punchiness or topicality of this “disrobing” does not stop there. Schweblin and Weerasethakul have presented their readers with decidedly mundane men, *average* men: brothers, fathers, business owners, and laborers who are ostensibly doing their jobs, going about their days. Ironic and darkly playful shades of the banality of (very human) evil contribute somber color to these otherwise surreal worlds.

Schweblin's "Olingiris" differs from "El hombre sirena" in that the restrictive grasp of men is more implicit than explicit. Within what reads like a subtly dystopian take on themes of compulsion and the female body, Schweblin's short story, "Olingiris," explores the lives and the shared ground of two women, referred to as *la asistente* and *la mujer de la camilla*, respectively. Both are described as leading lonely childhoods that were contoured by the shadows of distant male figures. *La asistente*, daughter of a modestly wealthy family, is seemingly the lone daughter in a brood of older boys. Her father is never home. Meanwhile, *la mujer de la camilla* is presented as fatherless. It is within the telling of this latter woman's backstory that only the dialogue uttered by a male character is found. A fisherman, who, it is implied, is maintaining relations with the girl's mother, takes her out to fish one day. While on the water, the girl asks: "—¿Usted es mi padre?" He responds with a definitive, silencing, "No" (170). Fast-forwarding to the adult lives of these two women, this state of relative isolation continues as both *la asistente* and *la mujer de la camilla* take up posts (in fact, they are referred to by the names of these posts) within the *Instituto*—as disconcerting a name for a professional body if there ever were one.

It is worth mentioning the activity that goes on inside of the *Instituto*, as such mention bears more feminist fruits that nourish this essay's argumentative ambitions. In short, six women at a given time are ushered into an impossibly white room where they are then seated in front of a nude woman who is lying face down on a gurney (presumably one of many *mujeres de la camilla*). These six women are provided with tweezers, which they then use to gingerly and methodically pluck *all* of the body hairs off of the exposed flesh of the "face-down"/faceless woman. *La asistente*'s job demands that she observe the nude body throughout the duration of this plucking-process. If the nude body makes any perceivable movements that suggest

discomfort or fatigue, *la asistente* docks the gurney-woman's pay through a demerit system. Despite having worked at the *Instituto* for several years, *la asistente* is entirely unaware of its purpose. Nor is *la mujer de la camilla* privy to the fate of her body hairs.

The Thai princess of Weerasethakul's princess-catfish scene and the woman-protagonist of "El hombre sirena" are propelled into the embraces of their fantastic fish(men) as a result of the cruel *presence* of the men populating their respective worlds. They find themselves hunted down, overly seen, by these various and multiple pairs of male eyes. Release, or the potential for release, from this tyranny pushes them toward the literal edge of man's terrain-domain (i.e. the water). Meanwhile, it is the *absence* afforded to men within the world of "Olingiris" that makes room for a new, fishy heartthrob. Schweblin describes *la asistente* as having developed a fixation with fish during her girlhood. And her most treasured possessions are large, illustrated books that detail the world's variety of marine life, as well as the steps necessary to install and maintain a home aquarium. It is her father who gifts her with these books. She, the young *la asistente*, is particularly enamored with a variety of fish called the *Olingiris*.⁸ A kindly, female private tutor takes note of and fosters the girl's fascination with the aquatic. For example, the tutor assigns the child the task of writing a poem that contains the names of as many varieties of fish as possible. The girl is twelve when her mother decides the tutor's services are no longer required. Perhaps as a reaction to this unwelcome news, the young girl takes to her coloring in an effort to salvage or artistically capture the joy she felt in the presence of this tutor. Schweblin's prose reads, "La asistente la dibujó un tiempo entre sus peces. Hizo algunos de la profesora particular besando al Olingiris y otro de la profesora particular embarazada de un Olingiris" (174). *La asistente* has conceived of a scenario not unlike what is depicted in Weerasethakul's film—in fact, these imagined liaisons between woman and fish share eerie parallelism. They both point towards

“successful” coupling between woman and fish—so successful is this coupling in Schweblin’s narrative that the fish impregnates the tutor.⁹ Perhaps their offspring will grow to be the merman who strikes up conversation with a lonely, discontent woman in another relevant short story of Schweblin’s, “El hombre sirena.”

These purely fanciful musings aside, this essay has thus far sought to speak to and explore the various and ironic ways by which this ecosystem of male domination and violence have not only rendered necessary but also made space for Schweblin and Weerasethakul’s reinterpretations of woman-animal unions. But what of this notion of outperformance? How could inclusion and contemplation of this notion of outperformance render all the more provocative and profound the Thai princess’s wincing expressions of pleasure as the catfish’s gaping mouth speaks to her genitals, or *la asistenta*’s daydreams of human uteri bloated with hybrid life, or the woman-by-the-seaside’s lingering gaze on the “cola brillante” of the *hombre sirena* (100)? Is this notion of outperformance simply an extension of Dugan’s notion of “aping,” in which the women engaged in these erotic unions with nonhuman animals are allowed to literally and figuratively “finish” rather than being literally and figuratively “finished off?” With these questions in mind, both Schweblin and Weerasethakul have successfully constructed worlds in which traditional agents of male violence, these nonhuman animals, have been converted into their (mortal men’s) challengers for women’s affections. A game of potential one-upmanship ensues. And while endnote 9 acknowledges that the criteria for “successful coupling” and “female pleasure” constitute murky analytical waters unto themselves, this essay maintains that it should be considered notable—and curious, if nothing else—that pleasure or its promise, in both the film vignette and the two short stories, is extended to these women by creatures who can breathe underwater.

Again, it is within Holly Dugan's analysis of Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* that the author puts forward her argument that "aping" or, more generally, mimicry of human sexuality by other simians was a very real anxiety for men of early modern England. At least, several works of both fiction and nonfiction from the period attest to such an anxiety.¹⁰ But the extent to which this anxiety was literal remains contestable. Just as Robson argues that Greco-Roman myths of bestial rape *metaphorized* expected female submission to man's earthly dominion, so too does Dugan claim that early modern fixation with aping demonstrated "the ways in which animal bodies helped to construct emerging sexual and gendered knowledge in the period, particularly around violent encounters" (217). That is to say, both Greco-Roman myths of bestial rape and this early-modern notion of aping appropriated the activity of nonhuman animals to explore through disturbing metaphor the (violent) limitations of shifting conceptions of personhood along gendered lines. In the creative and capable hands of Schweblin and Weerasethakul, though, this notion of "aping" is reinterpreted (and lingered on) twofold: no longer is successful mimicry of human sexual activity confined or made exclusively possible thanks to the similar corporeal forms of other simians, but now it is also *pleasure* (or its promise) that is lured from the bodies of human women by the erotic gestures of nonhuman animals (Dugan 225). Schweblin and Weerasethakul hold their authorial gazes on these woman-animal unions long enough to observe how the women *move* and *feel* during these couplings.

In conclusion, and as stated in the introductory section of this essay, Schweblin and Weerasethakul's works, with their respective re-imaginings of woman-animal unions, evince the shared anxieties underpinning literary figurations of aping and Greco-Roman myths of bestial rape. But these works also weave together the seemingly disparate elements or motifs found in both corpora of interspecies, carnal imagery. The more explicit sexual mechanics described in

writings of aping are applied to, or considered within, the wider zoological scope of Greco-Roman mythology, with a premium placed on pleasuring the human woman involved. There is, however, a literary artifact and rough contemporary of *Comedy of Errors* that prefigures Schweblin and Weerasethakul in its assembly or fusing of imagery of both corpora: John Donne's *Progresse of the Soule*. This long poem by Donne is the second focus of Dugan's essay. Within her analysis, Dugan writes that Donne's poem "charts a lustful cosmology in which plants, vapors, fish, fowl, beasts, women, and men are susceptible to violent seizures of both body and will" (223). Within this lustful cosmology of Donne's poem (Dugan also refers to the structure charted by Donne's poem as a "great chain of rape"), nonhuman simians are not the only organisms among the flora and fauna of this earth that are capable of causing (*and receiving*) sexual or eroticized harm (225). Although, it is worthy of mention that apes do, in fact, figure into this cosmology.

Dugan argues that Donne's poem ultimately and violently reasserts "gendered hierarchies of and over nature" (226). Given the syncretic bent of *Progresse in Soule*, as well as its philosophical thrust, it is Donne who could be considered the most engaging and direct "anti-progenitor" of the woman-animal unions described and visually realized in Schweblin's short stories and in Weerasethakul's princess-catfish scene. Dugan notes that, midway through this long poem, the narrator "boldly, and bizarrely" asks: "Is any kind subject to rape like a fish?" (223). In creating dark and devastating worlds where women are driven to engage with life underwater so as to find momentary respite from the quotidian tyranny of their lives-on-land, Schweblin and Weerasethakul ask their readers and spectators to consider: "Is any kind subject to *pleasure* like a fish?"

Notes

1. The title for this section was inspired by a portion of text, found in Joseph S. Alter's essay, "The Once and Future 'Apeman:' Chimeras, Human Evolution, and Disciplinary Coherence" (2007), wherein Alter cites biological investigations that have sought to problematize the trajectory of "human-chimpanzee speciation" by speculating that human and chimpanzee ancestors may have interbred after their respective evolutions into distinct species: "Whether this qualifies as bestiality is an open question, but the recognition of syngameon relationships provides a perspective on kinship that is inclusive rather than exclusive. It helps us to translate the obvious—that we were once just animals—into the less obvious—that our kinship to animals is closer and more intimate than we have thought, both in fact (with reference to the evolutionary record) and in principle. Species are not fixed entities but temporal lineages with significantly fluid boundaries. To adapt Sterelny and Griffiths's provocative question, only silence greets the question whether chimps plus humans are a genus. At the end of the Pliocene in eastern Africa this may have made for strange bedfellows" (640).

2. In the same essay by Piers Beirne that is mentioned toward the end of this section (Section 1), "Rethinking Bestiality: Towards a Concept of Interspecies Sexual Assault" (1997), the author makes graphic (but analytically necessary) reference to a "crudely-produced, undated German film" that "graphically depicts numerous human and nonhuman beings engaged in acts of interspecies sexual relations" (318). The film is called *Barnyard Love*. Beirne affirms that from his "amateurish perspective and despite the risk of anthropomorphism" there is no definitive, all-encompassing method by which to extract *consent* from nonhuman animals before engaging in any erotic activity (318). The violence inflicted upon the bodies of these nonhuman animals, their orifices and sexual organs incompatible with those found on a human body, are testament

enough to the inexcusability of bestiality. With this in mind, that the catfish in Weerasethakul's film scene should be attributed a male voice with which to speak in a human tongue, that *he* should knowingly and purposefully perform an anthropomorphic sexual act, firmly cements, I believe, the mythic quality of this "aquatic, erotic liaison" (Utterson 235).

3. Although not one of the analytical pursuits of this essay, it would be interesting to contemplate the relevance of class and socioeconomic status within the various literary and artistic corpora that feature woman-animal unions. Is the catfish marked by human conceptions of class if he is ostensibly divine? Is the palanquin-bearer's touch easier to obliterate from the surface of the princess's skin *because* of his inferior social status?

4. The film's dialogue is in Thai. All quoted dialogue is taken from English-language subtitles.

5. It would prove interesting to include analysis of Guillermo del Toro's *The Shape of Water* (2017) should someone feel inspired to extend or rework the topic of this essay. Certainly, his film contemplates with equal measures of politically-charged humor and bleakness the feasibility of aquatic erotics and this notion of outperformance along species lines. His film is also a testament to the enduring (often fetishized) fascination that male creatives hold for woman-animal unions.

6. To clarify, many women on the receiving end of sexual violence or predation within Greco-Roman mythology are semi or fully divine (i.e. Daphne). In this sense, they are not fully "human," insofar as this would suggest that they are subject to the limitations of conventional mortality. Of significance to this essay, though, is their corporeal makeup. These female deities, whether they are Olympian goddesses or earth-dwelling nymphs, are not described as possessing the bodily appendages or traits of different species.

7. In many ways, Schweblin and Weerasethakul's works constitute an act of restorative justice for the literal wolf. With this in mind, it proves further intriguing to acknowledge that much of the secondary literature compiled and consulted for this essay speaks to the interconnectedness of sexism and speciesism. Nonhuman animals are equally shortchanged and implicated within the patriarchal schema, according to such scholars as Piers Beirne. In the same article cited in Footnote 2, Beirne writes:

In short, because bestiality is in certain key respects so similar to the sexual assault of women, children and infants, I suggest that it should be named *interspecies sexual assault*...sexism and speciesism operate not in opposition to each other but in tandem. Interspecies assault is the product of how masculinity sees women, animals and nature as objects that can be controlled, manipulated, and exploited. When a man describes a woman as 'cow,' 'bitches,' '(dumb) bunnies,' 'birds,' 'chicks,' 'foxes,' 'fresh meat,' and their genitalia as 'beavers,' or 'pussies,' he uses derogatory language to distance himself emotionally from, and to elevate himself above, his prey by relegating them to a male-constructed category of 'less than human' or, more importantly, 'less than me.' Reduced to this inferior status, both women and nonhuman animals are thereby denied subjectivity by male predators who can then exploit and abuse them without guilt. Unchallenged, sexist and speciesist terms operate in concert to legitimate sexual assaults on women and animals." (327)

8. *Olingiris* is a fictional variety of fish of Schweblin's literary invention.

9. Anything and everything that seeks to speak to or tackle the subjects of sex, gender, human-versus-animal (are we—men, women, and everyone or anyone in-between—not animals too?)

Yes, we are technically great apes, hominids), etcetera, tend to groan under the weight of potential refutation. There is simply too much to say, too much to contradict or clarify. Deep awareness of these mountains of maybes was sustained throughout the piecing together of this investigative synthesis of Thai and Argentine creative production—all of the many, crowded possibilities teetering on the same token. This essay swims out into some very murky waters by suggesting that these couplings between the two woman-animal pairings are/were “successful.” What constitutes “successful” sex? Impregnation? Reciprocated pleasure? And what does female pleasure “look like” or “sound like,” exactly? The spatial limitations of this essay do not permit further delving into all possible refutations of the claims made in analysis of both the short fictions and the film scene. But other contemplations of both the princess-catfish scene and these short stories by Schweblin, with these questions in mind, are eagerly welcomed.

10. Dugan cites Edward Topsell’s *History of Foure Footed Beasts* (1607) as an example of a contemporaneous nonfiction work that was both inspired by and explored this fixation with simian mimicry of human behavior.

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