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Beautiful Bovines: Female Bodies in the Works of Nélida Piñon

In an article entitled "Female Memory in Narrative," Nélida Piñon proudly opens with the statement "It is with a woman's memory and body that I am happy to serve literature" (45). It is the body and the intellectual life of the feminine, which are so historically intertwined, that Piñon explores so beautifully in her work. In both "Big-Bellied Cow" and "Brief Flower," she constructs male-dominated environments in which her female characters, a mixed-race woman and a cow, respectively, act as expressions of feminine suffering. Their bodies, as are most female bodies in literature, are paramount to their characterization and to their worth as it is perceived by the men in the texts.

Many feminist literary critics have placed the female body in a position of utmost importance in understanding the ways in which women are viewed and the ways in which women view themselves. In her article entitled "Language of the Body in Women's Texts" Berta Lopez Morales states that "as a highly transgressive element in women's texts, the discourse of the female body should be considered a pivotal index of further elucidation of women's identity within the trajectory of traditional literary Western narrative" (129 Morales). In literature, the female body has been seen as a sacred vessel, a sexual playground, a temptation, a salvation, a comforting maternal entity, something both beautiful and repulsive. Women are seen at once holy for their ability to give birth and at the same time sinful for the sexual acts that make birth possible. "….woman" states Piñon, "had been deliberately created as a symbolic nature:

someone who, because she could not play an active role in the vast complexity of daily life, became over the years a genre whose identity had to be deciphered poetically and with difficulty" ("Female Memory in Narrative" 46).

However it's broken down, women are often seen as objects, icons, replicas, duplications, and visceral representations of themselves as women. In this sense, much of the literature we are raised with points to the story of *a* woman as the story of *every* woman, and Piñon acknowledges this interchangeability through the eyes of the patriarchy in both "Big-Bellied Cow" and "Brief Flower." In the former, Dapple is chosen by the farmer "absent-mindedly, as one who had grown tired of evaluating living things" ("Big-Bellied Cow" 414). Dapple has been selected because she must perform certain functions for the farmer; as far as he's concerned, it only matters that she is a cow. In the same sense, the way that society has viewed women in terms of their biological capacity to give birth and the aesthetics of particular physical attributes reduces them to nothing but indistinguishable bodies selected as mates for the functions they perform, much like cattle.

Similarly, in "Brief Flower" the protagonist is selected by all of the men who possess her simply because she is a woman who is fit for their requirements; she is chosen "as one casually chooses something that he is prepared to discard at any moment" ("Brief Flower" 421). She is, throughout the story, a nameless sexual object, one who seems not to understand what is happening to her but passively endures as she is possessed by men who only wish to use her body for their various physical needs – sex, farming, childbirth. From the time she is a child, "Men would pass by thinking how nice a woman is when she is young like that, and I am destined to rule that thing that grows in her or in some other one, for I am meant to possess the one who is waiting for me to lead her into the green fields, and if it is not this girl, I will enjoy

her in another one just as long as I live" ("Brief Flower" 419). She is a beautiful, fertile woman, and therefore valuable to men as both an aesthetic object and as a means for production.

When discussing the oppressed female body, it is impossible to escape the implications of pregnancy. It seems almost paradoxical that a woman can be both revered for her ability to give life and thought of as damaged for doing so. According to Morales,

> "Within the masculine discourse, the feminine body is disassociated and conceived as having a dual nature. The mind/body duality represents a splitting process of dematerialization and materialization, which produces antithetical realities such as the mother/woman, wife, virgin, sister, on the one hand, and the *femme fatale*, lover, prostitute or sinner on the other" (Morales 125).

The protagonist in "Brief Flower" exemplifies this split very well. She is both promiscuous and later, a nun; she is both a mother and a lover, experienced and yet innocent to the ways of the world. After she settles down with the first man in the story, "….she cleaned the house, took care of wild plants, decorated the table in a dedication to life. Delicate with the cleaning of objects. Until she was pregnant and pretty, the violence of growth. She had barely noticed it because she was simple, feeling its effects. Such was her modesty" ("Brief Flower" 420). She is "simple" and "modest" enough not to realize that she is pregnant, even though she expressly becomes aware of and connected to her own body earlier in the story, further illustrating the duality of innocence and sexuality noted by Morales. The father of her child leaves after she gives birth, denoting that she has lost much of her worth in his eyes now that she has become a mother; she has lost the vitality and sexuality that only young unburdened women can possess according to the standards of patriarchy.

Dapple's worth is also somewhat decreased through both motherhood and age. While it is true that her calf represents a capitalistic gain for the farmer, its conception is a great trial for him because he feels as though he is taking something precious from Dapple: "He led her along with the shame of one bringing a daughter to receive the son of some stranger, to lend that beloved flesh to the unknown lust of a procreator. Dapple was innocent, and he masked his embarrassment" ("Big-Bellied Cow" 414 - 415). The farmer sees his cow as an innocent victim, whereas he views the bull as "a procreator," a word which denotes action and agency. Furthermore, his "shame" at bringing her to be impregnated is likened to a father delivering his daughter to "the son of some stranger." As this analogy is used to described a man's feelings towards his cow, it denotes ownership on the part of the father and passive obedience on the part of the daughter. Using her brilliant and unconventional rhetoric, Piñon presents an analogy that is used as a reinforcement of the relationship between the farmer and Dapple, which is in turn an analogy for the relationship between man and woman.

In perhaps the most poignant illustration of male understandings of the female body in "Big-Bellied Cow", the farmer mourns Dapple's loss of innocence after her impregnation and tries, in his mind's eye, to make his cow understand why he cannot apologize:

> "On the road the man whistled, pretending to ignore the animal. The fear of perceiving something as visibly changed. What would he have done had he perceived the wound – not what one thinks of as mutilated and requiring care, but something which is done for such a fate and which is resented for precisely that reason. He wanted to say: look, Dapple, you don't know that I'm your owner and that's why this thing bothers me, if you knew it would be easy to explain why I let it be done, but the fact is that we're never aware that someone owns us" ("Big-Bellied Cow" 415).

Much like the protagonist in “Brief Flower,” Dapple is unaware of what is happening to her, according to the ponderings of the farmer. A lovely and innocent creature in his eyes, she can have no sex drive and do no harm. By referring to her impregnation as a “rape,” the farmer, who has endowed the cow with feminine qualities, is attempting to lift the responsibility of sexual transgression from her and therefore preserve her innocence. It is impossible to know the nature of the sexual relationship of Dapple and the bull; it is very likely that what transpired would be considered rape if the subjects were human, but they were not.

The fact that the farmer believes that Dapple was raped by the bull is an extremely relevant point in terms of Piñon’s expression of the suffering female body. Firstly, because he facilitates the “rape” even though he cannot watch, pointing to the ways in which male-dominated culture not only makes this kind of violation possible through its objectification of women, but then turns a blind eye to the suffering caused and shirks responsibility. Secondly, the farmer’s perception of her “rape” is important because he sees it as justifiable under the terms of his ownership of the bovine. In other words, her purpose is to provide him with a calf, and if she must be violated, it is only as a means to an end.

Piñon points to this kind of transgression in the name of functionality again in “Brief Flower.” The woman in the story is a very sexual being from the start, but she is not given sexual agency. This makes her both a seductress and a victim, another duality expected of women. In an article entitled “Rite of Passage: Latin American Women Writers Today,” Lucia Guerra Cunningham writes that “Female sexuality in its fluidity and multiplicity escapes, then, dominant cultural constructions. As the object of patriarchal discourse, the female body is fragmented by mutilation whereas the dichotomy between the virgin and the prostitute is the mirror image of a larger epistemological opposition between Spirit and Flesh….” (Cunningham 13-14). The

protagonist of “Brief Flower” is sexually violated at a very young age, having “recently acquired the gift of words,” and she remains sexually passive for the rest of the story, only taking control when she leaves to move on to the next lover. In many ways, “Brief Flower” tracks the sexual development of women in general, beginning with the understanding that their bodies are something to be taken and possessed, and gradually solidifying that idea through the demands of patriarchal domesticity. Her life with Pedro paints a very dark, and unfortunately common, picture:

> “Every day the boy would occupy the house, with a loss of ceremony and respect. He would scratch himself where the chair had abused him, after which he would drag her to bed. The girl, still fascinated, would let herself be led, somewhere between feeling irritated and exalted. As it became a habit, the man drained her of her will and urge. The orientations of her nature were scarcely defined” (“Brief Flower” 420).

“The orientations of her nature” need not be “defined” if she is only a body, an object that performs a function. Perhaps her passivity is an indication of the obedience required of women who live inside traditional gender roles because they are taught nothing else.

Dapple is also representative of women within the traditional domestic sphere. She has sex in order to reproduce because it is her obligation, she mothers her calf, acts as a friend and confidant to the farmer, and yet the text gives us no indication of her personality because it is irrelevant. She is a cow, Piñon seems to tell us, and just like a domesticated woman, her desires are inconsequential as long as she is seen as merely an obedient, functioning body. “The grandchildren were spread over the land,” thinks the farmer, “the cow had also spread so many things, even her manure had been a splendid performance, her duty to man…. It bothered him to know that he was the owner of one who, not sensing possession, let herself be dominated by a

look, the only virtue of surrender" ("Big-Bellied Cow" 417). Dapple's body is a purveyor of life in every sense. She gives nourishment to the soil, provides the farmer with a calf, and even her flesh can provide sustenance and growth.

It is extremely relevant that she is a cow, not only because, as has been mentioned, it makes her the epitome of functionality and an excellent metaphor for female objectification, but because the specific functions that she performs are very female in nature, and therefore ground the extended metaphor in unmistakable terms. Farmers own bulls in order to breed cows, a visceral and dominating task. Cows, however, cultivate life, something most readily exemplified in their ability to produce large quantities of milk, making them symbols of motherhood and nourishment. As the farmer watches her become accustomed to motherhood, this analogy becomes more apparent: "With time, Dapple grew used to those uncomfortable maternal duties, the small creature beside her emptying her udder, the exact abundance of that white liquid which would even produce butter, a splendid nature that aimed at fullness and avoided any loss. The strength of the animal had been passed on to the calf, but even so it could benefit man" ("Big-Bellied Cow" 416).

Dapple is purchased by the farmer in order to serve him, without consent. This fact coupled with the farmer's insistence on viewing her as anthropomorphic makes his ownership of her feel less like that of a man who owns a cow and more like a man who owns a person. "The purchase of an animal was a kind of slavery" he thinks, "once its benefit was found, there should be a peaceful clarification of what there is between a cow and a man" ("Big-Bellied Cow" 417). Although he expresses pity for the animal at several points throughout the story, he is never apologetic that he owns her or that she must undertake her duties as a cow, he is only sorry that she must suffer. Of course, in our understandings of cows, it is the natural order for them to be

owned and milked and bred, so of course the farmer would not be regretful of his expectations of the animal. In a quiet moment, the farmer reflects on the obedience of his cow, saying to himself, "'So cowardly that she accepts my animosity, was that how I understood her?' Then the shortness of the day, and the man was content with what forgiveness had eliminated" ("Big-Bellied Cow" 417). The traditional woman has been thought of in the same manner; she is meant to be possessed, to accept man's animosity, to perform her womanly duties in order to fulfil her role in the natural world.

"Brief Flower" begins with the lines, "Her inconsistency was racial. The sure orientation of her blood" ("Brief Flower" 419). With these lines, Piñon frames the protagonist's subservience not only in terms of her gender, but also in terms of her race, provoking once more society's ideas of what is "natural" in terms of human behavior. Her story might mirror that of a woman enslaved, fleeing from master to master, forced to work and perform sexual duties. "Later," writes Piñon, "other men, different from the first, tried more daring approaches, preparing for the advances that discipline races. As if they were going about tasks to dominate vague and circumspect women" ("Brief Flower" 420). Again, the patriarchy's racial domination is linked with that of women, evoking images of useful bodies put to work.

The fact that we never learn her name is significant in that we are viewing her through the narration of an omniscient narrative. This narration frames her as a woman who is any woman, and is very sparing in regards to her emotional life. In this regard we see once more Piñon's acknowledgement of feminine interchangeability in regard to usefulness. When asked what her name is, she responds "a girl is nameless" ("Brief Flower" 420). This response is described as "bewitching" in the text, indicating the perceived charm of a woman who knows she is essentially without identity, a woman who knows her place. Then, "Like a serene horseman

atop the restlessness of his mount, replete with code and shining sword, he answered for her: from now on, even if you haven't got a name, you've got a master" ("Brief Flower" 420). This reply, aside from denoting a slave and master relationship that carries into their domestic life together, situates man in a place of historically significant chivalrous honor in his capacity as lord and ruler of woman.

Dapples identity is also meaningful in that it is provided for her by her own master, in terms of her body. The farmer names her Dapple because of "those homey patches that did away with meaning and which only he could understand" ("Big-Bellied Cow" 414). The spots that so pleasantly define her as a welcoming and comforting presence also rob her of any real significance because they in turn define her. The farmer also feels that he is the only one who can understand them, a feeling which mimics the possessiveness often associated with the female form. Whether he feels an affinity for her or not is irrelevant, because he does not seek an understanding of her that is greater than her physical form.

Furthermore, Dapple's physique is constantly evaluated throughout "Big-Bellied Cow." Consequently, the only individuals who perform these evaluations are the farmer and his grandson. In fact, the whole story is told through a third person limited narration that describes the world in terms of the farmer's perception. Thus one can surmise that "Big-Bellied Cow" presents a look at the female body through the eyes of the patriarchy. Cunningham tells us that "A common textual strategy in contemporary women's literature is to appropriate a masculine voice to parody and undermine the epistemological foundations of the phallologocentrism…..this voice is ideologically employed with the intention to literally frame it and show its inconsistencies" (Cunningham 10). What better picture of phallocentric domination than a masculine, hardworking farmer? He constantly masks his sentiments, and his refusal to

emotionally connect with his grandson may be viewed as his fear of growing old and losing his place as patriarch of the family, over whom he is a domineering presence. This is exemplified as early as the first sentences of the story, which read: “It was not really a burial, it was more of a simple ceremony. The family had been reluctant, but when he demanded their appearance he was imposing an authority that had been obeyed ever so many times” (“Big-Bellied Cow” 414). His connection with Dapple, then, mirrors that of a traditional man who finds reprieve in the emotional honesty he can only express when around a woman, safe from the judgement of other males and those who he would dominate. He must not show weakness, lest his authority be challenged.

If we are to understand the farmer as the picture of patriarchy, and Dapple as the common woman, then his constant surveyance of her body takes on new significance. He visually reduces her to bits and pieces; we see her “quivering belly,” her “eyes so sad,” “the deformation of her loins,” her “sharp horns” – she is merely an amalgamation of cow parts, each significant in their relation to the farmer, much as women are viewed in terms of breasts, legs, and behinds. During the strange encounter the farmer has with his grandson, wherein the man stubbornly refuses to deviate from his literal interpretations, the boy notes that cows are “so nice you’d like to eat them.” He continues, oddly “Just any old piece” (“Big-Bellied Cow” 415). Sexual objectification of women often takes on culinary connotations, with phrases that equate women’s bodies with food and suggest ingestion of the flesh, and Piñon points to that objectification here.

In the course of this dialogue, the grandson dubs Dapple “A big-bellied cow. A Cow that’s grown so much that all of a sudden she’s going to change into something else.” This statement points to the idea of motherhood as a change in identity and as a basis for identity. Pretty soon, Dapple will be a mother, no longer virginal, no longer young, and once she is unable

to reproduce, no longer useful. She is also being viewed, once more, in terms of her physicality. “Big-bellied cow, big-bellied woman, big-bellied dog, isn’t it all the same thing?” asks the grandson, “They get so big you think they’re never going to stop, but I like it. Everything that grows should be respected” (“Big-Bellied Cow” 415). The story points to itself in this statement, the equation of woman and cow being the underpinning of the narrative, but it also calls attention to the fact that if patriarchal society sees women merely as biological resources for reproduction, there is nothing that differentiates them from cows or dogs. Furthermore, the grandson’s statement that “Everything that grows should be respected” denotes the distanced reverence that society feels for pregnant women, and again groups them in with cows and dogs, as they are, in his eyes, deserving of no more or less respect than anything else that “grows.”

Toward the end of Dapple’s life, the farmer makes a long and reflective examination of the animal. In a moment of clarity, he looks past the physical and understands Dapple as a living being whose trials are similar to his own: “The gentleness that he was analyzing was precisely what had become settled in his flesh, in his time as a man. The resemblance between the man and cow was the misshapen companionship of those who are equal in the difficult struggle. He patted the animal’s head, which she lowered softly in obedience.” Then, in a beautiful moment, he says to Dapple, “I never want your obedience again” (“Big-Bellied Cow” 417). As a man who becomes irritated at a complacency that he himself cultivated, he becomes annoyed with Dapple’s lack of reaction to this news, “Rebelling not against the animal who was enjoying the satisfaction of suffering in her body, but against the life that linked him to things, to that cow, affording him the skill of hesitation” (“Big-Bellied Cow” 417). Here, the farmer realizes that Dapple may not be just a body on which he can imprint his own ideal companion, but something that inhabits a body and suffers in the same ways he does. This shared suffering is frightening to

him because if he can relate on such a profound level with a female animal, it threatens his existence as a stalwart, masculine man, and therefore his whole identity. Finally, however, he relents to this truth as "A sob tightened his world, and he knew that he was joined to the sad beast whose solitude embodied his" ("Big-Bellied Cow" 417).

Although the protagonist in "Brief Flower" is objectified by all of the men she encounters, the explicit examination of her body is performed in front of a mirror, in solitude:

> "On certain evenings, right there in front of the mirror, she would get rid of the examination of her body. She would stare until she enjoyed it, the comfort and the feeling. She did not blush as the thought that she could be dazzled by that minute and exciting examination of her flesh. In that way the area that she had always imagined as dark and dirty was becoming clear and clean" ("Brief Flower" 419).

In this scene, Piñon is practicing a divergence from patriarchal language, a divergence so characteristic of her writing. As she states in *Women's Writing in Latin America: An Anthology,* "woman does not have a language of herself" (Castro-Klaren 79). It is her belief that women must "contaminate" the male dominated culture in which they find themselves through language. Void of those sexualized descriptions of the female form so often found in scenes of bodily discovery, she manages to convey her female character's communion with her own body in a way that is intrinsically feminine and deeply personal. Morales, who thoroughly explores the body of the woman author and its presence in language states that:

> "….women's writing is a restricted phenomenon due to the influence of the dominant patterns and cultural codes. Since women's discourse is built upon the dominant masculine model, it reflects and repeats the male world view created by the hegemonic literary codes. In this sense, the language of women's body shows in its own textuality

> the patterns established by male codes, focusing, for example, on some parts of the body and ignoring others" (Morales 123).

By establishing a rhetoric outside of the "dominant patterns and cultural codes," Piñon is freeing her character's own gaze from patriarchal standards, and making her a woman who is familiar with her own body in a manner that is devoid of aggression or judgement.

This characterization of the protagonist remains constant as she attempts to navigate a world that manages only to view her through the lens of patriarchal, bodily oppression. The time in her life in which she could be considered the most content, as it is expressed by the text, would be the time spent in the nunnery to which she and her son flee. "The woman had learned to fulfill her human duty as her body inhabited others," writes Piñon, "and in this multiplicity…. she accepted everything, because here, as before, she found herself convinced that she would rule the stars in their passage, in the briefness of their brilliance" ("Brief Flower" 422). It is in the exclusively female space of the nunnery that the woman feels the confidence and beauty that she once felt before she was subjected to male domination. Her experience is not religious because she is devout or feels any kind of faith; it is religious because she feels a sense of communion with the other women there, behind "the high wall and its locked gate" ("Brief Flower" 422).

She does not leave the nunnery because she wishes to, but rather because her son cannot exist in this feminine space. She, as a mother in the societal understanding of the word, must live for her child, especially because he is male: "Sad and predestined, she looked at the son of her flesh, who was imposing successive sacrifices upon her, and in chapel or at the table, she would become upset" ("Brief Flower" 422). Her flesh is not her own to rule because it also belongs to her male child, because she has, in the words of the grandchild in "Big-Bellied Cow," "changed

into something else" in motherhood. She belongs to the world of men. In this sense she casts herself from the safety of the exclusively female space because patriarchal society demands that she do so in order to be a good mother, and in turn, a good woman.

"The writer's struggle," states Piñon, is to invent in order to tell the truth. And to this end, he is dependent on the fabric of words which will deny him their hidden resources unless he finds the courage to destructure himself permanently and obey the intuition to bury his dagger in the heart of language and life, which is also the heart of humanity" ("Myth of Creation" 203). Piñon's own unique use of language is a testament to this feat, and with it she is able to construct narratives of women as they are seen by others, as they see themselves, and as they really are. She has established, in her own words, "A language prepared to overcome any prejudice or censure that might restrict its use" ("Myth of Creation" 204). Her stories create a picture of women as more than mere bodies, and trouble our notions of literature as we know it.

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