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Women, Animals and Fairness

An Ecofeminist Reading of Charlotte Wood's *The Natural Way of Things* (2015) and *Animal People* (2011)

Charlotte Wood's *The Natural Way of Things* has been variously described as a "dystopian fable" (Wyndham, 2015) and a "horror parable" (Newman, 2016). Set in a time that greatly resembles the present, in an unspecified location in outback Australia, and called "*The Handmaid's Tale* for our age" (*The Economist*, 2016), the novel has been celebrated as a fierce and timely engagement with misogyny. The novel was the 2016 winner of the Stella prize, an annual award for fiction or non-fiction written by Australian women. As the narrative begins, ten young women wake from a drugged sleep to discover they are imprisoned in brutal and dehumanizing conditions. They come to the gradual realization that their imprisonment is due to their involvement in sexual scandals, often with prominent men, and they are supposed to understand themselves as "the minister's-little-travel-tramp and that-Skype-slut and the yuck-ugly-dog from the cruise ship; they are pig-on-a-spit and big-red-box, moll-number-twelve and bogan-gold-digger-gang-bang-slut" (Wood, 2015, p. 47). The premise seems too horrific to be true but is in many ways chillingly realistic. Each scandal is reminiscent of incidents reported in the Australian media over the last few years,¹ and the prison itself is partly modelled on the Hay Institution for Girls, where girls born into poverty, including many Indigenous girls, were horrifically abused between 1950 and 1974 (Wyndham, 2015; Hart & Carter, 2014). Most reviews of *The Natural Way of Things* have focused, understandably, on its fierce feminist agenda (Newman, 2016; Lever, 2015; Goldsworthy, 2015), but the novel is also deeply engaged with the natural world – particularly animals, with whom the imprisoned young women are relentlessly compared.

The novel interrogates not only the mistreatment of women, but the parallel subjection of animals as pets, food, and symbols. In this way it builds on the preoccupations of Wood's earlier novel, *Animal People* (2011), which is a philosophical reflection on relationships between humans and animals. As Susan Wyndham points out, "it is possible to see *Animal People*, which examined the

1 For example, army cadet Daniel McDonald secretly filmed himself having sex with another cadet and broadcast it over skype. His partner was called a "skype slut" and bullied until she left the army (ABC News, 2013). In Australia in the early 2000s there were several instances of gang rape by rugby players (Fickling, 2004), that Wood drew on for Yolanda's back story. Verla's back story of an affair with a politician who claims to love her and then denounces her has some parallels with the resignation of former New South Wales Health Minister John Della Bosca (Watson, 2009), although there are also a number of other similar cases (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 2009).

way humans treat animals, as a logical precursor to *The Natural Way of Things*, in which humans are treated like animals” (2015). Wood herself notes that “[t]here’s all kinds of stuff that’s going to be lost in the way people talk about [*The Natural Way of Things*] – stuff about nature and animals and a dream world and non-realism in writing and language and beauty and landscape” (quoted in Wyndham, 2015). For James Bradley, “[a]s the women descend into wildness, [the landscape’s] mute, brooding presence elides the distinction between escape and self-erasure, self-assertion and self-destruction” (2015–2016). Kerryn Goldsworthy observes that “[t]he natural world and its creatures provide much-needed relief – to the reader as well as the characters – from [the] world of brutality, bad food, and hard labour, and the pragmatic tenderness towards animals that was evident in Wood’s novel *Animal People* is present again here” (2015). The roles inhabited by animals and the natural world in the text, however, go beyond providing “relief” or “a brooding presence”. In a discussion of feminist taxidermic practices in *The Natural Way of Things*, Laura White argues that “[r]ather than simply critiquing the objectification of women or seeking to restore women marked as deviant to human status, Wood utilizes the position of the animal-object to challenge patriarchal constructions of the human” (2019, p. 139). My analysis agrees with and builds on White’s perspectives.²

In their juxtaposition of women and animals, *The Natural Way of Things* and *Animal People* can be effectively approached through the dual lenses of feminism and ecocriticism. Where feminism examines the subjection of women, and ecocriticism examines the subjection of nature, ecofeminism interrogates the connections between the two. As Karen J. Warren puts it, “ecofeminism’ has come to refer to a variety of so-called ‘women-nature connections’ – historical, empirical, conceptual, religious, literary, political, ethical, epistemological, methodological, and theoretical connections on how one treats women and the earth” (1994, p. 1). Drawing on ecofeminism – particularly that of Australian philosopher Val Plumwood – and critical animal studies, this chapter proposes an ecofeminist reading of *The Natural Way of Things* and *Animal People*, in order to show how each novel interrogates the connections between the subjection of women and animals in the Western cultural imaginary.

As Lisa Gruen observes: “The categories ‘women’ and ‘animal’ serve the same symbolic function in patriarchal society [...] The role of women and animals in postindustrial society is to serve/be served up; women and animals are the used” (1993, p. 61). In this chapter I discuss several different ways in which women and animals intersect in the texts. I first consider instances of women being dehuman-

2 As this chapter was going to press, I discovered that Bárbara Arizti (2020) recently published an article “At Home with Zoe: Becoming Animal in Charlotte Wood’s *The Natural Way of Things*,” which discusses *The Natural Way of Things* using the lenses of posthumanism and transmodernism. Drawing on a different – though related – theoretical paradigm to that which I am using, Arizti arrives at a reading of *The Natural Way of Things* that resonates with my own.

ized and “treated like animals”, before discussing the novels’ references to animals in literature, psychoanalysis and dreams, and the characters’ relationships with real animals in the texts. Both novels also conceptually link female reproductive processes and meat production and consumption. Finally, I discuss what can be seen as a powerful and unsettling piece of “ecofeminist art” created by the two main protagonists of *The Natural Way of Things*, a doll created of rabbit skin and human hair, that destabilizes the boundaries between nature and culture. At the end of the novel, the protagonists Yolanda and Verla embrace their animality as a source of liberation – having claimed their inner animal, they seek to locate their sense of self beyond gender, beyond culture, and beyond the human.

Ecofeminism, Nature and Fairness

Ecofeminism draws attention to a connection between the subjection of women and the subjection of the natural world. One way in which women and nature are aligned is by the traditional Western binary that places masculinity with culture, the mind, logic and civilization, and femininity with nature, the body, emotion, and wildness. Warren terms this the “logic of domination” (1993, p. 322). According to Viktoria Davion, traditionally “women have been associated with nature, the material, the emotional, and the particular, while men have been associated with culture, the nonmaterial, the rational, and the abstract” (1994, p. 9). This observation has informed much ecofeminist scholarship, including that of the influential Australian philosopher Val Plumwood. As Greg Garrard puts it:

Plumwood’s most important contribution is a critique of the gendered reason/nature dualism. She presents it as ‘the overarching, most general and most basic and connecting form’ of a historically varied series of dualisms. It can serve this general analytical function because ‘reason’ has so often been called upon to hyperseparate both men from women and humans from animals, and so can stand in for both dominant terms. (2012, p. 28)

While the premise of the “twin dominations of women and nature” (Warren, 1987, p. 4) is compelling, some theorists have built on this formulation in ways that perpetuate rather than transcend these categories. Ecofeminists such as Ariel Kay Salleh (1984), Sharon Dubiago (1989) and Marti Kheel (1991) argue that the salvation of the earth is dependent on “feminine” qualities of care and intuition (Davion, 1994, pp. 17–26; Garrard, 2012, pp. 26–27). Davion criticizes these approaches as “ecofeminine” rather than “ecofeminist”, and argues that “while ecofeminists are correct in challenging dualisms such as human/nature, reason/emotion, and masculinity/femininity, the solution does not lie in simply valuing the side of the dichotomy that has been devalued in Western patriarchal frameworks” (1994, p. 36). A dismantling of these categories and an openness to new ways of thinking about the natural world and our place within it is essential.

Like Davion, Plumwood likewise believes these dualisms contribute to a “master narrative” that privileges reason over nature and men over women. She argues that to be defined as “nature” rather than “culture” entails a loss of power and autonomy:

To be defined as ‘nature’ in this context is to be defined as passive, as non-agent and non-subject [...] It means being seen as part of a sharply separate, even alien lower realm, whose domination is simply ‘natural’, flowing from nature itself and thus the nature(s) of things. (1993, p. 4)

The notion that women are conceptually degraded by their association with nature has been explored by a number of others, including Sherry B. Ortner, who asks: “Is female to male as nature is to culture?” (1974). Ortner concludes that in Western societies an association with nature underscores the oppression of women. Plumwood goes further to suggest that not only women but the natural world itself are endangered and unfairly compromised by the reason/nature dualism, as both nature and women are seen to invite domination, which flows “from nature itself and thus the nature(s) of things” (1993, p. 4).

Building on similar observations, the title of *The Natural Way of Things* is a provocation. Is unexplained incarceration, misogyny and abuse “natural”? The word “natural” overlaps in several ways with the concept of “fairness”. When something is regarded as “only natural”, it is seen as “the way things are”, unquestionable, fair enough. Often, however, what is claimed to be natural is not at all. As William Cronon explains:

When we speak of ‘the natural way of doing things,’ we implicitly suggest that there can be no other way, and that all alternatives, being unnatural, should have no claim on our sympathies. Nature in such arguments becomes a kind of trump card against which there can be no defense. (1996, p. 36)

Culturally ascribed gender roles are frequently understood as “natural”. Aggressive male behavior is sometimes defended as “natural” – “boys will be boys”. And even more troubling still, female victimhood is often implicitly depicted by the media as a “natural state”. Verla, one of the novel’s two main protagonists, reflects:

What would people in their old lives be saying about these girls? Would they be called *missing*? [...] Would it be said they were abandoned or taken, the way people said *a girl was attacked*, a woman was raped, this femaleness always at the centre, as if womanhood itself were the cause of these things? As if the girls somehow, through the natural way of things, did it to themselves. They lured abduction and abandonment to themselves, they marshalled themselves into this prison where they had made their beds, and now, once more, were lying in them. (Wood, 2015, p. 176)

As Verla gradually realizes that no one will come for her, she comes to understand that the world outside is complicit with her disappearance and degradation.

Verla's reflection on "the natural way of things", quoted above, is the only point in the novel in which its title is explicitly stated (2015, p. 176). The concept of nature and the natural, however, ricochets throughout the text in myriad ways. The many versions of the "natural" evoked by the novel sit uneasily beside the meaning of natural as "fair" or "expected". Encounters with "nature", particularly in the form of animals, occur on nearly every page. Animals are a constant presence, on several registers: literal, metaphorical, and mythological. The women encounter actual animals, both dead and alive, they listen to the sounds of birds, they live alongside insects, they kill rabbits for food. They also dream animals, remember animals, and hallucinate animals. The women are compared to animals and treated "like" animals, but at the end of the novel, for Verla and Yolanda, an identification with animals offers a kind of salvation – in fact the *only* salvation presented as possible within the text. Their assumption of animal identity is not, however, an acceptance of their degraded roles. Nor is it an "ecofeminine" celebration of a "natural" woman-animal connection. Rather, *The Natural Way of Things* unsettles and questions the boundaries between the animal and the human – a task already taken up in *Animal People*.

Treating Women Like Animals

Like *The Natural Way of Things*, the title of *Animal People* operates on multiple registers. On the surface it refers to people who feel affection for animals. The protagonist Stephen, a hapless middle-aged man who works in a café at Melbourne zoo and is contemplating breaking up with his adored girlfriend, often feels judged as he does not see himself as an "animal person". He is allergic to cats and dogs, has no interest in pets, and struggles to understand the intense emotional connection his neighbours display to their pet dog, which contrasts ironically with the scorn and ill-will they show to homeless people. Through Stephen's eyes, however, the novel provides a kaleidoscopic account of animal-human connections. The phrase "animal people" comes to stand for these entangled connections, as well as for the novel's ultimate revelation of kinship – humans, and the creatures living around them, are all animal people: humans are animals, and animals are people.

Epigraphed by a quotation from John Berger's seminal essay "Why Look at Animals?" (2009), this novel is part story, part philosophical treatise.³ Over the course of a single day, like a modern day Bloom, the aptly named Stephen roams Melbourne and contemplates hundreds of examples of animal representation, idealization, companionship, incarceration, cruelty, and activism.⁴ Through Stephen's eyes, humans encounter, consume, and appropriate animals: from the butcher

3 Stephen's reflections on the disconnect between zoo animals and zoo visitors draw heavily on Berger's essay.

4 James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922/1998) describes a single day in the life of Leopold Bloom as he wanders about Dublin, intersecting with Joyce's alter ego Stephen Dedalus.

shop to awards for animal bravery, from stuffed toys at the zoo to a young girl's fairy skirt whose scraps of fabric settle about her "like the puff and shiver of flamingo feathers" (Wood, 2011, p. 177). At the same time, Stephen thinks about women – his mother, his sisters, his girlfriend Fiona, and her daughters are the most significant figures in his life. Indeed, while the novel examines the "unfair" way animals are treated in a general sense, on numerous occasions it draws attention to a conceptual link between animals and women, from sexualized "my little pony" toys for young girls, to the face of a female crack addict that reminds Stephen of an animal.

Early in *Animal People*, Stephen accidentally crashes his car into a pedestrian, who turns out to be a crack addict. She is described in animalist terms, and reminds Stephen of photographs of tortured animals that a young female animal rights activist has shown him earlier in the day:

For an instant, seeing the girl cornered in his car, Savannah's animal torture photographs returned to him: the grizzled narrow head, the thick face pocked and pierced and blotched, the panting mouth, eyes closed in pain and fear. (Wood, 2011, p. 75)

He tries to take the wounded woman to a hospital, but she directs him instead to a methadone clinic and disappears. Still in shock, he relays the story later in the day to his co-workers at the zoo. His colleagues, initially shocked that he has injured a pedestrian, assure him that she is a junkie, less than human. They marvel at his innocence (he comes from a country town) and are horrified that he has given her his phone number, assuming she will attempt to take advantage of him. This callousness is contrasted with the inflated care, preoccupations and grief they display for favoured (and incarcerated) animals at the zoo. A parallel hypocrisy is discernible in comments made by the guards Teddy and Boncer in *The Natural Way of Things*. While Teddy shrinks from Yolanda's rusty rabbit traps, declaring them "cruel" (Wood, 2015, p. 150), he has no qualms going spear fishing, discussing his ex-girlfriends in belittling terms, or physically and verbally abusing the imprisoned girls.

In *The Natural Way of Things*, in a development and exaggeration of themes first broached in *Animal People*, the imprisoned young women are explicitly dehumanized and compared repeatedly to animals. The zoo of *Animal People* gives way to a prison. As the girls are admitted to their incarceration, their heads are sheared like sheep and they are shoved roughly into a room together: "Yolanda went sprawling, exactly as a sheep would totter down a slatted chute into the shocking light and shit and terror of the sheep yard, until she found herself in yet another room. Full of bald and frightened girls" (Wood, 2015, p. 17). They are chained and led like dogs: "Come on,' he coaxes, as if she is a small dog, and gives a little tug on the leash." (Wood, 2015, p. 19). At night they are locked in tiny rooms which have the appearance of kennels:

After that first day's marching, then the food (so-called), they had been driven here like dogs – Teddy this time, with a thick sharp stick he just picked off the ground – to what he called the shearers' quarters. He yelled it, a command: 'Get! Shearers' quarters!' they just stood there because they didn't know what the fuck he was talking about, and that was when he started whacking the long stick on the ground. Turned out it made sense to herd them like dogs, because shearers' quarters was what Yolanda had already seen and thought were kennels. They all did. (Wood, 2015, p. 49)

Through hunger and desperation, the girls even begin to behave like animals, as Verla observes: "they lunge at their dishes like dogs" (Wood, 2015, p. 45). Their captors refuse to tell them where they are, insisting that the most important question to come to grips with is *what* they are. The girls are supposed to accept their identities as "sluts" and "whores", who deserve to be treated like animals.

The bowls around her are scraped with spoons and the girls breathe through their mouths like animals.

You need to know what you are. Verla is not an animal. (Wood, 2015, p. 46)

The first part of the novel is packed full of statements like these, which are examples of the dual oppression of women and nature. White draws attention to Cary Wolfe's explanation that: "violence against human others [...] has often operated by means of a double movement that animalizes them for purposes of domination [...] a maneuver that is effective because we take for granted the prior assumption that violence against the animal is ethically permissible" (Wolfe, 2009, p. 567, quoted in White, 2019, p. 146). White argues that "Wood builds on a historical pattern of animalizing transgressive women to separate them from respectable women and justify violence against them, and she reveals the consequences that such conceptions hold for animals as well as women" (2019, p. 146). The reason it is terrible to be treated like an animal is, as *Animal People* affirms, that animals are treated terribly.

Animals, Feminism and Sexual Reproduction

The explicit juxtaposition of women and animals in the opening pages of *The Natural Way of Things* is buttressed by encounters with animals in both the physical world and in dreams. On one level, the animal presence of birds around the imprisoned girls is inherently calming. Birdsong provides a rare balm for the grim realities of the girls' new lives. The very first lines of the book are filled with the "lunatic" laughter of the kookaburra: "Here, on this first morning, before everything began, she stared up at the sky as the blue night lightened, and listened to the kookaburras and thought, Oh, yes, you are right. She had been delivered to an asylum" (Wood, 2015, p. 4). The natural call of the kookaburra, which resem-

bles harsh laughter, appears to give voice to the madness of her own situation. Later Verla hears other birds and makes up her own names for them: “The waterfall birds, whose calls fell tumbling. And the squeakers, the tiny darting grey ones. Who would have known there could be so many birds in the middle of absolutely fucking nowhere?” (Wood, 2015, p. 4).

The birdsong makes its way into the girls’ dreams. Verla dreams that the bonnets they are forced to wear are made from the bones of dead birds. In their dreams, the girls inhabit the metaphorical possibilities of animals. Hetty dreams viscerally that she is a tiger, killing and devouring a zebra, and Maitlynd interprets: “That’s not about food, it’s about sex!” (Wood, 2015, p. 107). Verla dreams that she has to wear a dead lamb’s head, dripping with blood, shoved on top of her own. She also becomes obsessed with the idea of a beautiful white horse she is sure will come and save her. She hears it galloping around the compound at night. At this point she does not understand the true extent of her politician ex-lover’s betrayal, and believes that he is still waiting for her. The white horse is associated with an unrealistic “fairytale” vision of rescue by a prince, as well as masculine sexuality. Towards the end of the novel she finds the carcass of a dead horse, and equates it with the horse of her dreams. While this affirms her belief that the creature really existed, it also embodies the death of her hopes of rescue from the outside world. The shape-shifting, amorphous animals of the girls’ dreams are contrasted grimly with the decomposing bodies of animals caught in and abandoned below the enormous electrical fence that circles the compound. Like these animals, the girls are flesh and blood, vulnerable, earthy, meat.

An awareness of the female human body as “meat” is a concept touched upon in both novels. Each novel explicitly links female bodies, meat, and the processes of reproduction, thus interrogating the conceptual link between them. In *Animal People*, Fiona discovers a nipple on a piece of pork she is preparing for the oven – “tender, pink and clean as Fiona’s own” (Wood, 2011, p. 52). In *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, Carol J. Adams points out that “[w]hat is absent from much feminist theory that relies on metaphors of animals’ oppression for illuminating women’s experience is the reality behind the metaphor” (Adams, 1990, p. 61). The visceral depictions of the evidence of animal suffering in *Animal People*, however, address this problem, and attest to the fact that the animal references in *The Natural Way of Things* go beyond the merely metaphorical. Fiona is also reminded of the meatiness of her own body when her daughter is born via C-section: “She lay there with the baby on her breast, tearful and exhausted, while they cauterized something, some part inside her. Fiona’s grey eyes widened and her voice dropped to a whisper as she told him: ‘it smelled like a *barbecue*’” (Wood, 2011, p. 53). In *The Natural Way of Things*, Yolanda realizes that the messy, physical details of blood and flesh, which are inescapable aspects of the growth and birth of babies, are part of the reason for the hatred for and oppression of women (Wood, 2015, p. 122).

Femininity, animals and reproduction coalesce in Yolanda's disturbing memory about her brothers' pet mice. One of the mice produced a litter of baby mice every few weeks, which her brother scooped up and deposited in the bin at the back of their apartment. She was afraid of "the mother mouse and her cold, incessant production," but now feels a disturbing affinity for her, and intimates that her own imprisonment has something to do with the way the mouse was treated (Wood, 2015, p. 31). Ortner suggests that "[b]ecause of woman's greater bodily involvement with the natural functions of reproduction, she is seen as more a part of nature than man is" (1974, p. 76). Reproduction, of which women bear the physical and emotional brunt, reminds men too much of their own fleshly beings, their own mortality:

It was why they were here, she understood now. For the hatred of what came out of you, what you contained [...] She understood because she shared it, this dull fear and hatred of her body. It had bloomed inside her all her life, purged but regrowing, unstoppable, every month: this dark weed and the understanding that she was meat, born to make meat. (Wood, 2015, p. 122)

Plumwood describes the "denial of dependence on and contempt for the processes of life and reproduction" as part of the "Western master consciousness," which is built on the dualities of reason/irrationality, mind/body, men/women, culture/nature (1993, p. 77). These dualities underwrite both men's treatment of women and humanity's treatment of the environment. In a vignette that would be equally at home in *Animal People*, Yolanda remembers a YouTube video of an elephant giving birth and reflects on her own disgust upon the arrival of the enormous placenta: "Alien, monstrous, female" (Wood, 2015, p. 122). By overlaying animal and human reproduction, Wood makes a similar observation to Plumwood. Wood's relentless juxtaposition of women, animals, meat and reproduction underscores Simone de Beauvoir's comment that due to her time-consuming and physically dangerous role in reproduction, the female "is more enslaved to the species than the male, her animality is more manifest" (1953, p. 239). Fiona's and Yolanda's experiences of their own bodies as "meat" equate the human with the animal, but hinge on the biological realities of womanhood: menses and childbirth.

Later in *The Natural Way of Things*, Yolanda attempts to connect with the reproduction of animals in a healing and triumphant way. She finds a rabbit out in the open, ready to give birth, and scoops her up and warms her underneath her top. As she walks, the rabbit gives birth against her body:

Then oh! a throb of birth, she felt it against herself, a wet warm slide. It was coming, it would be safe. Another nuzzling wet slide, she walked so tenderly, curving and cupping the mother and the soft wet bulbs of the babies with her arms and body, and it was her own live born she carried, she was animal now. (Wood, 2015, pp. 210–211)

It is an incandescent experience. She looks forward to raising the baby rabbits, and imagines even sharing them with the other girls, their softness and sweetness providing companionship, redemption, relief. Here the novel toys with what Davion terms the “ecofeminine”, as discussed earlier – the idea that women have a deep and innate connection with nature (Davion, 1994, p. 36). But the rabbit kittens do not survive. This foreshadows the fact that Hetty, the only girl to become pregnant in the novel, kills herself midway through the pregnancy by clutching hold of the electric fence. *The Natural Way of Things* categorically denies the narrative of hope through new birth, and searches instead for grislier, darker narratives of liberation and the remaking of self. These darker narratives, which I discuss in the next section, at once deny the “ecofeminine” and confront the cultural assumptions that legitimize the oppression of women and animals, while questioning the belief that culture is superior to nature and that humans are superior to animals.

Culture, Animality, and Selfhood in *The Natural Way of Things*

At the beginning of *The Natural Way of Things*, the girls reject their forced identification with animals, but by the end of the novel, Yolanda and Verla embrace their animal selves. As the year progresses, food supplies run low, and the compound is completely cut off from the outside world. The power goes off, although not the power in the lethal electric fence that encircles them. The prison guards turn out to be prisoners as much as the girls are. They must find a means to survive. Yolanda starts trapping rabbits for food, and Verla collects mushrooms. For Yolanda, the rabbits provide an entirely new identity. She traps and kills them, eats them, skins them and wears their fur. This new identity as huntress and wild-woman gives her strength and power, and freedom from the men who still want to oppress her. As Laurence Buell points out, a significant insight of ecofeminism

is its exposure of the double paradox of ‘nature’ having been androcentrically constructed as a domain for males, in contradistinction to female-coded domestic space, yet at the same time symbolically coded as female – an arena of potential domination analogous to the female body. (2005, p. 109)

As Yolanda claims an identity as a huntress she is able to subvert this model and symbolically conquer Boncer. He desires to rape her but concedes finally that she has become stronger than he is: “In the iron sound of her traps she knew Boncer heard her new knowledge: she was strong, and he was weak” (Wood, 2015, p. 144). The remote bush compound is no longer “a domain for males”, but rather the space of Yolanda and Verla, who come to know and appreciate the natural world more deeply than any of the others, and learn how to depend on it for their own survival.

Through her association with the rabbits, Yolanda is wholly transformed. Verla respects what she is doing, but mourns the loss of her old friend “Yolanda, gone mad with rabbit filth and guts. She cries for the ordinary girl Yolanda who will never return” (Wood, 2015, p. 219). Yolanda’s only chance of survival is to reject entirely her former self, and the culture to which she once belonged, and to embrace her animality. Verla’s journey is more nuanced, and it takes her longer to let go of her old self and the outside world for which she still longs. Verla’s “crime” was to have an affair with a married politician and accompany him on what was effectively a “grand tour” of Europe on taxpayer’s money. This journey was transformative for her, and she bristles at the crude way the media and the public interpret it: “you can lead a whore to culture, they said in the comments” (Wood, 2015, p. 18). This remark, a play on the phrase “you can lead a horse to water but you can’t make it drink”, at once compares Verla to an animal, and identifies her as a “whore” intrinsically incapable of appreciating culture. Verla’s encounters with European art, however, inform a process of self-realization in which she remembers, interrogates, and finally transfigures the art.

Throughout her captivity, Verla is haunted by the artworks she encountered in Europe, which seem to create almost exclusively male spaces, aside from the room adorned with tapestries of “The Lady and the Unicorn”.⁵ The over-engineered barbed-wire fence of the enclosure reminds her of the ornate architecture of Gaudi’s Barcelona, and as she treads through the grasses around the compound, Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* runs through her head. Her ex-lover had given her a copy, just as Bill Clinton gave one to Monica Lewinsky (Folsom, 2005, p. 97). When Yolanda cradles a dying kangaroo caught in one of her rabbit traps, Verla remembers seeing the Pietá in Rome. Her lover had tried to explain its history and proportions to her:

but in that bustling domed space Verla felt there was only herself and the woman. She understood her, as if those were Verla’s own fingers pressing against slack lifeless flesh [...] And now here Yolanda sits, her own pieta in the dirty grass beneath a bright cold sky, crooning and snuffling, murmuring into the dusty fur, cradling and rocking. (Wood, 2015, pp. 225–226)

In Europe Verla is most drawn to artworks that depict the tensions of female experience, and in the remote Australian outback she transforms them in her memory and imagination in ways that blur culture with nature.

Through a piece of art she creates together with Yolanda, however, Verla shifts from awed spectator to powerful artist. When Hetty agrees to offer herself sexually to Boncer, with the understanding that this “sacrifice” will leave the other girls

5 The tapestries of the Lady and the Unicorn, completed around 1500, are normally on display in the *Musée de Cluny*, Paris, but visited the Art Gallery of NSW in 2018. For the occasion, Wood gave a speech on “The Lady and the Unicorn” (2018), in which she discusses how the tapestries’ themes of femininity, animality and captivity resonate with *The Natural Way of Things*.

free of his attention, she requests various items as “payment”, including, bizarrely, a doll. The other girls are flabbergasted and amused, but Verla and Yolanda simply get on with creating the thing. Verla thinks of Vincent Van Gogh, who out of madness created something beautiful, and decides to do the same:

They have at last, quite thoroughly, been driven insane. Verla sits, floating on her nest above the cirlet of mad girls, and is visited by the paintings in Paris. Madhouses, and mad deeds. The hospital garden at Arles. The hospital at St Remy. This is no hospital, but he made something of his madness. (Wood, 2015, p. 220)

Like Van Gogh, who painted images of Arles and St Remy through his madness, Verla wants to *create* out of the pain and confusion that surrounds her.

The doll that Verla and Yolanda sew together is an ambivalent and horrifying creation, but is a true piece of art: heavy with significance, layered with meanings which cannot easily be reduced. They make the doll with scraps of old clothes, leather and guts from the rabbits, and their own hair. It is not a baby doll they craft but a woman, sewing into its body their own pain and degradation: “It filled them with something deep, slow-burning, some determination they did not understand, but slowly the doll’s misshapen, ugly body grew out of the shames and degradations of their own” (Wood, 2015, p. 221). Yolanda hides a dead rabbit baby inside the doll. It thus contains bodies, and death, and a parody of new life. And later, it begins to stink. “Only now did the two girls look at each other’s faces in wonder at what they had made. A totem, it could be, or a ghost. It could be a warrior, voodoo doll, goddess, corpse” (Wood, 2015, p. 221). White points out that

[b]y coproducing a representation of cross-species progeny, Yolanda and Verla radically challenge confining notions of reproduction and family, and the reaction of the other women and the captors who find the doll deeply unsettling highlights how their creation disrupts expectations about the separation of human and animal lives and deaths. (2019, p. 155)

The doll is an ambiguous representation of their own suffering, but by the very act of creation they gain some power over it. The creation of the doll grants Verla and Yolanda autonomy and ownership of their own experiences, which contributes to a degree of self-knowledge and clear-sightedness which the other girls, to their doom, do not achieve. The doll also, in its strange merging of nature, culture, and female degradation and desire, becomes an arresting and ambivalent ecofeminist icon that resonates beyond the boundaries of the text itself.

Resolutions

The Natural Way of Things suggests that an acceptance of the “animal” is the only way forward. At the end of the novel, a bus arrives to collect the girls and take

them away – they assume to safety. Yolanda, half rabbit now, is nowhere to be seen, but waits by the compound gate to escape when the bus leaves. They are each given a bag of expensive cosmetics that they sigh and fawn over, but Verla soon realizes that the bus is not taking them to freedom, and the cosmetics are not a true gift after all. The cosmetics that the girls pounce on at the end of the narrative are symbolic of the systematic oppression of women and animals in a consumerist society. Animal rights movements have exposed horrific links between cosmetics and cruel practices of animal testing. Cosmetics, marketed nearly exclusively at women, underscore an acquiescence to patriarchal ideals, and a subjection to a capitalist system of inflated prices and desires. As Gruen puts it, “[b]y purchasing and using cosmetics, women become complicitous not only in their own reduction to the object of a gaze, but also in the suffering and death of animals” (1993, p. 71). The cosmetics also reinforce conceptual distinctions between human and animal, as the girls are “rescued” from their animalistic state, and become more “human” with the application of scents and creams. The cosmetics are bait, designed to lure the girls into false senses of security and relief, as they believe they will be welcomed back into the society which has cast them out. Verla recognizes that no welcome awaits them – they are being transported towards a fate worse than the one they have left behind.

Verla contemplates killing herself with one of her mushrooms, but the memory of and a living connection to Yolanda, her “fellow creature” changes her mind:

Her voice comes from a fine grey blur spinning through the grass, across the plains, and it is not old dead Walt Whitman’s voice she hears but the fresh, living rhythm of a beating heart, of surging blood and paws thrumming over the earth. Verla feels this pulse, urgently, in her body. (Wood, 2015, p. 310)

Internalizing Yolanda’s heartbeat, Verla decides to live, and, with the help of the other girls, forces the driver to let her off the bus. Alone in the outback, she realizes she may still die, but she at least has a chance, and her own animal totem, a little brown trout, springs to life in her mind.

At the end of *Animal People*, Stephen embraces his neighbour’s dog Balzac, who has just been fatally hit by a car. He gazes into its eyes and inhales the creature’s final “dank animal breaths” (Wood, 2011, p. 261). In this state he finally understands who he is and what is important: “It was in this abjection, he saw now – his eyes closed, face pressed into the dog’s neck – that we were most animal and because of that became most human after all. We are all only hair and bone and stinking breath” (Wood, 2011, p. 261). In becoming a “fellow creature” to a dying dog, Stephen is also finally able to accept and commit to the lives of Fiona and her daughters, whom he loves. He discovers he is most human when he is most animal.

By dwelling on the most basic of mammalian life processes – the heartbeat and the breath – each novel locates meaning, significance and freedom from the rea-

son-nature binary in the shared experience of life itself.⁶ This awareness of life itself is independent of cultural norms and gendered restrictions. The end of each novel crystallizes an epiphanic moment of being alive within and beneath oppressive structures, and of connecting with another being through a shared presence rather than language. As Plumwood notes:

The inferiorisation of human qualities and aspects of life associated with necessity, nature and women – of nature-as-body, of nature-as-passion or emotion, or nature as the pre-symbolic, of nature-as-primitive, of nature-as-animal and of nature as the feminine – continues to operate to the disadvantage of women, nature and quality of human life. (1993, p. 21)

These two novels are interrogations of and responses to these observations. As Stephen shares a dying dog's breath and gazes unflinchingly into his eyes, as Yolanda's heart beats in time with a rabbit's heart, and Verla vanishes into the scrub as swiftly and lithely as a fish, the characters experience a connection with their animal selves. These experiences dismantle the restrictive binaries between culture and nature, human and animal, male and female. Both women and animals are treated "unfairly" by world-views and power structures that view them as "naturally" ripe for domination. These novels attempt to imagine another way.

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6 This reading resonates with Arizti's (2020) discussion of the significance of Rosi Braidotti's (2013) concept of zoe, or life, in *The Natural Way of Things*.

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