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The human-animal: Primality, rape, and resistance in Charlotte Wood's *The Natural Way of Things*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores rape myths – defined as "prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists" (Burt 1980: 217) – as they are treated in Charlotte Wood's *The Natural Way of Things* (2015). I begin by discussing the animalising ideology that underpins certain rape myths. I then examine how, through an allegorical tale, Wood explores rape myths associated with gendered primality, and discuss her subversion of the prey/predator dynamic. Wood challenges, critiques, and subverts for narrative purposes socially reinforced understandings of rape as instinctive, uncontrollable or primal in nature, and emphasises a narrative of survival following sexualised violence or coercion.

Introduction

This article explores ideas of the human-animal in rape myths and their subversion in the award-winning Australian novel *The Natural Way of Things* by Charlotte Wood (2015). Rape myths – those prejudicial and false beliefs which are held about the victims and perpetrators of rape, and which typically serve to excuse or legitimate violence against women (Burt 1980) – are widely circulated across the cultural landscape. Literary texts are no exception. In their introduction to the book *Rape and Representation*, titled "Rereading rape", Lynn Higgins and Brenda Silver (1991) observe that "rape and sexual violence have been so ingrained and so rationalized through their representations as to appear 'natural' and inevitable" and that stories told by women as well as men have contributed to perpetuation of this "insidious cultural myth" (2). Literature, and the arts generally, contribute to public understandings of what constitutes "real" rape, helping to "shape the cognitive systems that make rape thinkable" (3), through stereotypical depictions of rape, rapists, and victims/survivors. However, the arts also offer a means of exposing and disrupting these myths. Higgins and Silver ask: "Where, if anywhere, do literary texts offer possibilities of resistance?" (1991: 4). I will argue that *The Natural Way of Things* resists the idea of rape as natural or inevitable, through its subversion of the ideology

underlying rape mythology that considers women as sub-human – more like animals than human.

Wood's novel tells the story of 10 young women imprisoned on a remote sheep ranch at the mercy of their male jailers, Boncer and Teddy, and their incompetent female nurse, Nancy. The abandoned ranch functions as a rural jail, run and operated by the mysterious yet powerful entity – possibly a corporation – known only as Hardings. All the incarcerated women have either been involved in high-profile sexual scandals such as consensual affairs with powerful married men or have been raped. By the narrative's end, the protagonists Yolanda and Verla have evolved to display animalistic qualities such as lack of speech and killer instincts for survival, and Boncer, Teddy, Nancy, and one of the imprisoned women, Hetty, have died. While most of the women are "saved" when Hardings sends a bus to collect them, Yolanda and Verla spurn this suspicious alleged rescue and flee to the outback, presumably rejecting the human society that Hardings represents.

In part, the impetus for Wood's novel came from revelations of the extreme abuse perpetrated at the Hay Institute for Girls, which operated in rural New South Wales from 1961 until 1974. It was a place of punishment for young women, many of whom disclosed that they had been "sexually abused or assaulted in some way" and were consequently viewed as "promiscuous" (Wood, quoted in Wyndham 2015). While publication of *The Natural Way of Things* in 2015 preceded the rise to prominence of the #Metoo movement – an online social movement which disrupts the established victim-blaming conversation surrounding rape and sexual assault by challenging the myths that rape is a rare and/or deviant and/or trivial event – the book presciently and powerfully reflected the zeitgeist in which the movement emerged (L'Estrange 2019; Wyndham 2019). Indeed, the novel can be seen as a progenitor of the genre referred to as "#Metoo novels" or "MeToo Lit"; that is, disparate and critical narratives of gender, sex, patriarchy and power emerging in tandem with the activist movement addressing violence against women (Cosslett 2019; Sehgal 2019).

As well as being considered a #Metoo adjacent novel, *The Natural Way of Things* can be categorised as dystopian. As with all genres, dystopian fiction is not fixed or singular, its borders "not rigid, but permeable" (Donawerth 2003: 29). Scholars highlight that dystopian texts are typically centred on an imagined totalitarian or post-apocalyptic society where there is injustice, and, through their narrative, offer a critique of contemporary social, cultural, political, environmental or economic realities (Sargent 1994; Baccolini & Moylan 2003; Moylan 2018). In the more specific sub-category of feminist dystopian fiction the critique authors present is typically focused on "gender domination" (Cavalcanti 2000: 152). Indeed, Keith Booker (1994: 337) observes that the fact that dystopian fiction allows writers to challenge current norms, structures and processes through an imagined future makes it a "natural genre" for feminist writers with a political agenda to address patriarchal logic. As a feminist dystopian novel, *The Natural Way of Things* takes the contemporary problem of women's oppression and extends it in a "what if" scenario where selected women are imprisoned in an isolated and tyrannical society and suffer denigration and ill-treatment. Their incarceration upholds patriarchal power structures as well as reinforcing heteronormative discourses on traditional gender roles and sex-role stereotyping; that is, the women are largely the victims of sexual assault yet they are condemned for it or for exposing it.

The women in Wood's novel are leashed, sheared, blinkered, locked in dog kennels and used for labour – conditions usually reserved for non-human animals – and "gradually accept those aspects of their selves that are closer to the animal world" (Arizti 2020: 12). Their process

of development to varying degrees of animalisation begins with their being dehumanised by external forces – their incarceration and treatment by Hardings, Boncer, Teddy and Nancy – but they do not uniformly accept or reject their new animalised role. Most of the women reject the idea of becoming animal and cling to human interests, such as the creature comforts of their previous life. However, Yolanda and Verla choose to embody the evolution from human to "human-animal" – my term – and are the only prisoners who truly escape the camp. It is their reaction to, and rejection of, the human social hierarchy, by embracing a human-animal existence beyond its confines that, I argue, subverts the animalised ideology manifest in certain victim-centric rape myths. It allows a reimagining of the human-animal existence as a new form of freedom from the entrenched misogynistic, patriarchal and unequal power structures evident in *The Natural Way of Things*.

Bárbara Arizti (2020), in a fascinating analysis of the two protagonists, finds Yolanda's trajectory problematic. She considers the women's dehumanisation through the lens of Rosi Braidotti's (2019) insights regarding post-humanist studies: that current challenges to anthropocentrism are highlighting "the seamless connection between the natural world and culture" (Arizti, 2020: 1) and theorising the natural (animal) and the human as existing along a continuum. Arizti finds that Verla succeeds in "bridging the traditional poles" (13) of human and animal and demonstrating the nature-culture continuum of her own identity. However, Arizti sees Yolanda's eventual form as one that is "deprive[d] … of meaningful human rationality" (1) and her "letting go of the human portion of the continuum" (12) as an involution. For Arizti, then, Yolanda cannot represent the continuum of nature and culture that Braidotti theorises, and this restricts the character's potential to challenge the issues raised in Wood's work, because "[t]he social evils Wood's story denounces – ingrained sexism in particular – need to be tackled in the terrain of the human" (12-13).

While I agree that Yolanda's transformation is more animalised than Verla's, I consider Yolanda and Verla as complementary representations of an identity that is *separate* from human (culture), in their refusal to be re-incorporated into a patriarchal rape culture represented by Hardings's "rescue" at the end of the narrative. I utilise Nick Haslam's (2006) theory of "animalised dehumanisation" to interpret the use of animalisation as a means of dehumanising women and as part of rape mythology in contemporary Australian society. Verla and Yolanda eventually exist outside the patriarchal and anthropocentric hegemonic discourse by subverting the idea of animalised dehumanisation, re-imagining it instead as a form of freedom with agency. As the other women do not choose the path of the human-animal, they neither transform themselves nor escape Hardings and the wider society that Hardings represents.

Predator and prey: animalising ideology in rape myths

Rape myths are many and varied and include notions such as that women "cry rape" only when they have been jilted or have something to cover up in their own sexual behaviour, and that "only bad girls get raped" (Burt 1980: 217). Rape myths, as singular or collective social fictions, are derived and reinforced through "sex role stereotyping, adversarial sexual beliefs, sexual conservatism and the acceptance of interpersonal violence" (Powell *et al*. 2013: 460). Of concern to this article, in particular, are the specific rape myths associated with animalism, and their ideological foundation.

In this group is the myth that positions the perpetrator as a *predator,* an animalisation of identity which may blur their human status or responsibility. Indeed, Martha Burt's (1980: 217) only perpetrator-specific myth – "rapists are sex-starved, insane, or both" – assumes that

rapists are, in the words of Tammy Garland *et al*. (2016: 60), "unable to fully control themselves" and therefore "*blameless* [emphasis added] for their actions". Like animals, they are casualties of their biology, driven by their pre-determined inherent instincts or impulses.

Other rape myths buttressed by animalistic ideology focus on women as victims, and portray them as provocative, deserving or incautious *prey*. This is a process labelled "animalised dehumanisation" by Haslam (2006) who asserts that this is one of the central ways in which women are othered in patriarchal culture. Women who are dehumanised in animal terms are seen as lacking "uniquely human" characteristics such as civility, refinement, moral sensibility, rationality and maturity. As Haslam (2006) sought to categorise processes of othering of women, his findings influence research on the underpinnings of rape myths by extension, as animalised dehumanisation feeds into misogyny. For example, Kasey Morris (2013) furthers the analysis of the animalised manifestation of otherness through a study of the dehumanising of sexualised or beautiful women. Through that research one can understand animalised dehumanisation as an extension of misogyny by way of removing women, particularly sexualised women, from the human – i.e. civil, moral, rational – realm.

Animalising rape myths and their attendant ideology are embedded in a much broader discursive field. There are, for example, discourses which conflate meat eating with normative masculinity and vegetarianism with traditional femininity, as well as feminist critiques of speciesism – the privileging of human subjects in the world and the mistreatment and exploitation of non-human animals (Adams & Donovan 1995; Adams 2010; Kemmerer 2011; Morris 2013; Brown 2016). In *The Natural Way of Things*, there is an interplay of hunter and prey in Yolanda's evolution to human-animal which is of particular interest in light of these discourses. The novel thus draws upon and resists not only the animalising ideology underlying rape myths, but also the discourses in which this ideology is embedded, thereby contributing to the subversion of animalised dehumanisation through the disruption of the predator-prey/masculine-feminine binary.

The human-animal in *The Natural Way of Things*

Feminists have for some time drawn parallels between the superiority/inferiority binary assumed to be inherent in human-to-non-human relations and that in relations between men and women, as "[the ways in which] we talk about women and animals are often the same, and words that degrade women and animals are used interchangeably" (Brown 2016). Indeed, Mary Wollstonecraft, considered one of the founding feminist philosophers, took care to distinguish the animal from the human in her 1792 work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, noting the need to consider *all* humans (not just men) as deserving of rights (Ramos 2018). Wood's application of woman-animal parallels in *The Natural Way of Things* supports my argument that this novel be considered a work of "feminist critical dystopia", described by Ildney Cavalcanti (2003: 47) as "a subgenre of literary utopianism that has become a major form of expression of women's hopes and fears".

As the novel's title suggests, the core conflict within the narrative is arguably the idea of violence against women as natural, and characteristic of a hierarchy deemed natural. The women exist on the sheep ranch within a hierarchy of power reminiscent of a food chain, with every captive woman at the lowest link, and the nurse Nancy not much higher. To (re)establish this hierarchy within the isolated ranch, the women's primality, or relegation to the animalistic, is at first forced upon them through Boncer and Teddy. But Yolanda and Verla eventually embrace this primality-infused existence, turning it to their advantage, and survive their

imprisonment, escaping Hardings. The novel therefore presents an interesting subversion of women's animalised dehumanisation, and shares some ground with other creative works written by women that have "[subverted] the assumptions on which victimization is founded through *allegiance* with animals" (Scholtmeijer 1995: 241). In the sections that follow, the animalisation of the captive women in *The Natural Way of Things* will be considered through discussion of animal imagery and metaphor; the distinctions between wild, domestic, and livestock animals; and the evolution of Yolanda and Verla into the wild human-animal category.

The hierarchy of animal agency: wild, domestic, livestock, or male?

On the first day at the abandoned sheep ranch, Yolanda and Verla are immediately swallowed up by the new role and the rural surroundings in which they find themselves when Teddy shears their heads. Wood's use of the word "shearing" at this point, as opposed to "shaving", brings livestock to mind, specifically sheep, and symbolically links to "a specific [colonial] Australian history of control over animal skin" (White 2019: 150). The shearing of the two women's human qualities is represented by the cutting of their hair and removal of their previous clothing – they are forced to wear harsh, rough clothing and bonnets which restrict their field of vision (a possible nod to Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*) – resulting in a forcibly simplified version of Yolanda and Verla. Once Yolanda has been processed in this way, she is pushed roughly down a slatted chute and staggers "into the shocking light and shit and terror of the sheep yard", where she is silently met by other "bald and frightened girls" (Wood 2015: 17).

From the outset the women are treated as domesticated or working animals, with leashes, blinkered bonnets and a scheduled life of labour intermittently broken up by feeding time and sleep. They sleep in kennels and are led about like sheep (livestock) or dogs (domesticated). They are denied human agency and deemed sub-human through this treatment, more like animals than people. However, it is important to note that they are reduced to an animal status that is *useful*, as they are put to work clearing and creating a road for Hardings (arguably a nod to Australia's convict-labourer history). This labouring-animal status is later contrasted to that of domesticated animals through Yolanda's and Verla's likening of the women to dogs.

It is not until the novel's end that a third type of human-animal is introduced: the wild human-animal. The other women prisoners in the novel accept their designation as animals to a certain extent, finding agency or power within its confines by denying or embracing certain animal qualities. The forms of freedom eventually found by Yolanda and Verla exist outside this frame, thanks to their personification of the wild human-animal, whereas Nancy is more the domesticated pet (lesser than, but tolerated by, the men), and some women spend hours each day ridding themselves of hair, using tweezers they have bargained for. In an interview, Wood notes the animalistic grooming process those women take part in in order to *not* be animalised, to retain an established measure of femininity (that is, of being closer to human than animal): "Plucking each other's hair... I guess the evocations of animal grooming and all that" (quoted in Edwards 2020). Wood cleverly constructs an act directed towards acceptable femininity (hairlessness) as distinctly *animal* in nature (social grooming). The grooming does not imply a delineation between categories of animal; this moment simply presents the three grooming women as a social group like a herd.

The differentiation of animal types is significant, as each stage of the women's animal experience determines the level of freedom or agency granted to them, or taken by them, within

the power structure depicted. The distinction between human-animal (livestock), human-animal (domesticated), and human-animal (wild) is a means of disaggregating the concept: even human-animals exist within a hierarchy of value based on usefulness and subservience to an authoritarian power. Nancy, the ranch's fake nurse, is seen as a lesser being by the men, though higher in the hierarchy than the captive women. And Nancy, in turn, views the captive women as lesser beings, although for different reasons from those of Boncer and Teddy. In this way, Wood links internalised misogyny – one of her core thematic concerns in *The Natural Way of Things* – to the animalisation of women. Interestingly, such a link is explored in a study by Jeroen Vaes *et al*. (2011) of perceptions of sexually objectified women, which provides insight into the role of internalised misogyny in perpetuating animalised dehumanisation. Vaes *et al*. found that "sexually objectified women are dehumanized by both men and women but for different reasons" (774), with the women participants in their study appearing to be driven to do this by the desire to distance themselves from the sexualised women depicted in images presented to them, whom they may consider "vulgar and superficial" (784). In the novel, internalised misogyny is seen in Yolanda's and Verla's consideration of the other women as animal throughout the narrative. The instances of their likening the other women to dogs range between condemnation of their primal or unrefined behaviour – "[the girls] lunge at their dishes like dogs" (Wood 2015: 45); "driven down [to the kennels] like dogs" (49); "her dumb dog's body knew" (92); "ugly dog" (112) – and recognition of their supposed role as man's companion – "[Boncer] puts a hand out to Hetty, stroking her head like a puppy's" (242). At one point Verla describes Yolanda as such a companion: "Are they friends? Verla considers this, trudging. Perhaps, but in the bodily, speechless way of a man and his dog" (257). These dog references are in Yolanda's or Verla's thoughts, not the men's.

Until their eventual deaths at the hands of the women, Boncer and Teddy treat the women primarily as livestock: consumable animals. The idea of their vulnerability to consumption as livestock is later contrasted with their change in diet when aid from Hardings disappears. After the supplies run out, the women's (and men's) diet consists largely of meat – a patriarchal text according to Carol Adams's work, *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (2010). Adams details the realm of meat as distinctly masculine and patriarchal in historical contexts, with vegetables being seen as the more feminine option. Yolanda, who becomes a hunter and provider of meat with her rabbit traps, assumes a traditionally masculine role. The women soon realise, however, that one cannot live on rabbit meat alone; it is nutritionally insufficient. To survive, the women take on the roles of both hunter and gatherer, reflecting both masculine and feminine symbolism in the context of food provision. The women become self-sufficient as a group, although with Yolanda and Verla providing more than the others, while symbolically consuming the flesh of Yolanda's eventual human-animal (wild) form, as I will discuss below. The women's status as human-animal (livestock) is challenged by their own eating of meat, though only Yolanda progresses to become a hunter.

The only representation of *rapist* as animal or human-animal in the novel occurs during a conversation between Boncer and Teddy after they have locked the women in the kennels. From their discussion it is clear Hardings has offered them a monetary incentive to refrain from sexually touching the women and has threatened disciplinary action should they do so. After dismissing the idea of abusing the women sexually (though they do not use such wording), Teddy adds, "We'll have to watch ourselfs [*sic*] down the track though, I s'pose" (Wood 2015: 58), implying that time without sexual gratification will make restraint difficult. This assumption echoes commonly held beliefs in Australia (where *The Natural Way of Things* is set), given that a National Community Attitudes Survey in 2013 found that "[m]ore than 4 in 10 Australians (43%) believed that rape resulted from men not being able to control their *need*

[emphasis added] for sex" (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2018: 12). In this moment, Boncer and Teddy present themselves as being at the mercy of bodily urges, though they remain convinced of their superiority over the women, who they view as animals to be consumed or used.

While the novel suggests an important distinction between livestock, domesticated and wild animals in relation to the women as human-animals, no such distinction is applied to the male characters. Indeed, aside from the above example, they are seen as exclusively human, with urges, rather than humans exhibiting animal instincts. Even during Boncer's attempted oral rape of Yolanda, which is the only sexual assault narrated within the text, she sees "what Boncer [is]: a stupid, ugly child, underfed, afraid" (Wood 2015: 142). In this moment, Boncer is painstakingly humanised and represented through Yolanda's pity, which adds depth to her own, decidedly human, actions: "She stood. *I will not*" (Wood 2015: 142). Given that she has thus far been viewed as sub-human or animalistically dehumanised, her standing up and speaking her refusal rather than submitting is a distinctly human act, even though it comes as she adopts the rabbit traps about her waist – the instruments that aid her evolution to hunter, provider, and eventually wild human-animal. Perhaps it is Yolanda's ultimate human act, reclaiming her status as person when facing an instance of sexual assault and a person who views her as sub-human. And this is what Boncer most fears: understanding that these women are people. In this scene, Yolanda's speech, pity for Boncer, and bipedal stance in defiance disrupt the categorisation of women as "other" or animal in the mind of an intending rapist. This is a moment of Yolanda's *humanisation* in clear view of the attempting rapist, and the reader.

On the other hand, an arrangement between Boncer and another of the women, Hetty – an imbalanced and sacrificial arrangement reflecting coercion – is played out mainly off the page. Hetty offers herself to Boncer in return for preferential treatment by way of clothing and care, and to prevent his potential sexual violence towards the group from escalating. Through their arrangement Boncer's sexual *needs* are considered, by both sides, to be assuaged, again presenting a view of male sexuality as based on a need which, if not tended to, increases the likelihood of sexual assault. What we do see of their arrangement, rather than sexual assault or activity, concerns Ransom, a doll that Hetty demands the other women make as payment for her sacrifice. In making the doll, out of rabbit fur and the women's hair, Yolanda and Verla are compelled to "unsettl[e] the species border by creating a figure that combines human and animal materials" (White 2019: 155), furthering the human-animal imagery. Hetty's eventual suicide, killing both herself and the foetus inside her, returns her to the earth as the women bury her; the real (human) baby is consumed into the natural order, but Ransom "survives". Boncer carries Ransom with him after her death, and this appears a means of displaying his grief rather than a connection to either animals or the earth, and his grief consolidates his identity as human.

Teddy also takes a woman, Joy, to his room, under threat of injury or death by speargun after Boncer dies from eating poisonous mushrooms collected by Verla. Teddy's kidnapping of Joy can be read as a safety measure to deter any attempts on his life. However, Joy's later mention of having been "in his bed" leads the reader to believe rape has occurred. Teddy's concern for his survival, then, does not stop him from using his power over Joy for his own gratification. His prioritisation of this over keeping distance from one who may (and does eventually) kill him seems paradoxical. There are two possible interpretations: Teddy can be considered irrational in his fear, and acting on an impulse to dominate, or considered unable to control himself regardless of the circumstances. The former is a more animalised motivation

as it lacks rationality (Haslam 2006), while the latter echoes the consideration of male sex drive as uncontrollable.

Overall, the men's continued status as human contrasts with the dehumanisation of the imprisoned women, and with Nancy's presence as both fake nurse to the women and pet to the men. Certainly, the men are not treated as consumable, labouring or domesticated animals. Yet Teddy's action in sexually abusing Joy even when it endangers his life makes him appear arguably the least human of all.

Becoming wild: the evolution of Yolanda and Verla

Yolanda's eventual form as human-animal (wild) is a paradoxical amalgamation of hunter (albeit non-traditional) and prey: woman and rabbit. She embraces this duality, finding purpose and strength in using her rabbit traps. When she removes them from her belt, she realises that she shrinks "back into her ordinary self again. Not hunter, only girl" (Wood 2015: 167). Adorning herself in rabbit pelts is a symbolic manner of becoming animal, and her human presence further diminishes when she stops speaking: she has chosen to become more animal than human. However, Yolanda is also the hunter *of* rabbits, and so in a way engages in auto-cannibalism, fuelling her new life with the flesh of her own kind. This is not unlike some elements of auto-cannibalism present in *The Handmaid's Tale* discussed by Maria Christou (2016).

When the wardens of their prison have died, the group of women is "freed" by Hardings. The company sends a bus and driver to remove them from the electric-fenced property, although their destination remains suspiciously mysterious. Hardings also offers recompense in the form of makeup items from a fictional brand, Phaedra. The suggestion is that the women may regain their humanity through an artificial, commercialised femininity, and indeed, they fall gladly upon the gifts. This recalls an earlier reference to cosmetic femininity: Nancy was known for her strong chemically feminine scent. Through Nancy's initial characterisation as cosmetically female, and the captive women's eventual release adorned with cosmetic goods, Wood cleverly crafts a troubling image of womanhood as inherently cosmetic – that is, a false or manufactured identity which can be granted or removed.

Yolanda is at first the only woman to openly deny Hardings's power over her freedom: she refuses Hardings's aid and escapes the ranch when the gate opens for the bus, fleeing into the outback to survive on her own. By this time she lives a silent existence, draped in the pelts of her rabbits and trusting her instincts. In her final form as human-animal (wild) Yolanda is predatory as a means of survival: her hunting is aimed at meeting her simple bodily necessity of eating, and she is reverent towards her slain prey in the preserving of their skin. As hunter and human-animal (rabbit), Yolanda eventually exists in a realm outside that of the human-animal idea underlying rape myths – that women are sub-human, or prey – as she has evolved *beyond* human in order to survive. I use the word "evolve" here to denote psychological and physiological changes in response to threat, external stimuli, or altered habitat, and to describe her transformation into human-animal as development in a positive sense rather than in terms of regression or degeneration into animality. Her subversion of the constraints on her as human-animal is a process of gaining freedom from the human hierarchy rather than submitting to ejection from it.

Verla lacks Yolanda's strong animal instincts and boards the bus. Verla too has been transforming, but her transformation is an internal reflection of Yolanda's physical, visible

evolution. While Verla initially believed herself to be above the other women, and less deserving of their treatment, she harbours vivid fantasies of fighting her captors – "Verla dreams of clawing at faces, spitting and fighting" (Wood 2015: 106) – and of escape, eventually bonding with Yolanda. Both dream of burrowing free:

> [Verla daydreams] She will walk to the fence, burrow into the ground like an animal, tunnel her way free. (83)
> At night [Yolanda] dreamed herself with claws, digging a burrow. Tunnelling out under the fence, into the teeming bush. Not returning to her old life, never back there, but inwards, downwards, running on all fours, smelling the grass and the earth as familiar as her own body. She dreamed of an animal freedom. (237)

Despite their similarities, Verla's fantasies remain such, while Yolanda's manifest through her behaviour. While Yolanda does not physically become an animal, her embodied actions are animalistic. This is not the case with Verla and thus she leaves on the Hardings bus.

However, Verla's final moments in *The Natural Way of Things* see her also shun her previous role as human, although she does not fully embrace the animal life as Yolanda does. On the bus she soon detects an unseen threat, and suspects Hardings is not returning the women to a safe place. She forces her way off, aided by the other women, who, however, remain on board. Verla "calls through the scrub in her mind to Yolanda, her protector, fellow creature: I love you. I am your sister, and you are mine" (2015: 310). The narrative closes with acknowledgement of Verla's uncertain fate as she stands in the middle of nowhere, unsure if she will be able to find Yolanda, but knowing she cannot return to her previous existence.

Even though all the women (except Hetty and Nancy, who have died) have been removed from the sheep ranch, only Verla and Yolanda have truly escaped it, by refusing Hardings's aid. The fallout for denying Hardings's continued control over their life is increased risk of death or suffering, stranded in outback Australia as they are: "It will be dark soon, and will grow cold. It will be hard. She might die" (2015: 313). On the last page, Verla recalls the image she has had of her "other self", in dreams: "a little brown trout, hovering motionless in the water, waiting" (313). The trout disappears, leaving only ripples to show it ever travelled this stream.

While Yolanda cloaks herself in the skin of rabbits and embraces their physicality, Verla's transformation is entirely internal, the trout existing only in her mind. Both women adopt the human-animal form as a means of resistance and survival: Verla more human than animal, Yolanda more animal than human.

The question remains, does the evolution to human-animal afford them more freedom in their post-Hardings world, or less? Though they both survive, which aspect – human or animal – saves them? I claim that their evolution to human-animal, to something beyond their original form, is what ultimately makes survival within their prison, and escape, possible. In subverting the application of a "sub-human" categorisation to the rape victims/survivors, Wood creates an evolution of the characters that extends beyond what is understood as female-human. In essence, Yolanda and Verla are considered less than human in the prison, and arguably before that within a patriarchal society; to survive, they evolve beyond human, to human-animal, in a manner that ultimately removes them from the power structures that permeate the prison. Yolanda demonstrates this through her refusal of the "rescue" by Hardings, Verla

through her poisoning of Boncer and escape from the bus. Wood has used the figurative chains that bound these women – "you need to know *what* you are" (2015: 18); that is, *what*, not *who* – and forged a means of survival outside the patriarchal status quo: "beyond *girl,* or *female*. Beyond human, even" (193). Certainly, their new life stranded in outback Australia is perilous, but we are given to believe that the fate of the women on the bus is equally if not more so, because they still exist within the hierarchy they knew both before and during their imprisonment.

However, it is important to observe that Yolanda's evolution is not always viewed by readers as a progressive development. Wood noted in an interview the mixed reception of Yolanda's "salvation":

> some readers have been upset by the idea that, is this the only way forward for a girl, to say I'm not even a girl anymore, that is how I'll be free? But, that's how it is for Yolanda (quoted in Edwards 2020).

Certainly, Yolanda's limited choices for agency or power on the ranch contributed to her embracing of a human-animal form, but I propose that her welcoming of her animal power is a physical retrieval of her story, her narrative, from those who had bound it to her (assumed) sub-human form, "that thing they pawed and thrust and butted at" (Wood 2015: 122).

Conclusion

The Natural Way of Things explores ideas of the animalised dehumanisation of women in an allegorical manner, through the journey of the protagonists, Yolanda and Verla, and their evolution to a human-animal form while imprisoned on an isolated sheep ranch as punishment for having been subject to sexual abuse. I have analysed the novel in light of rape myth ideology, with particular attention to the way its narrative subverts the notion of women as sub-human prey. I have explored a categorisation of the imprisoned women as types of human-animal (livestock, domestic or wild), the humanisation of the male jailers even in moments of their inhumane action, and the escape of the two protagonists thanks to their new human-animal identities. Yolanda's evolved form – more animal than human – ensures her survival in outback Australia, while Verla's internal evolution – leaving her still more human than animal – emboldens her to poison her jailer and escape, but with her survival uncertain. In this manner, Wood reimagines and reconstructs the human-animal as having power outside the human-dominated hierarchy of a patriarchal society, undermining notions of anthropocentrism in a world where one's humanity can be determined or negated by those in power based on sex. Yolanda and Verla become truly free from Hardings and the men who have victimised them through their willing (re)absorption into the wild or non-human realm, whether physically or mentally. In this freedom, they are unconstrained by the cultural, social and legal forces that made the sheep-ranch prison a reality.

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