



## Article

# “At Home with Zoe”: Becoming Animal in Charlotte Wood’s *The Natural Way of Things*

Bárbara Arizti

Department of English and German Philology, University of Zaragoza, 50009 Zaragoza, Spain; barizti@unizar.es

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**Abstract:** This paper focuses on Charlotte Wood’s 2015 dystopian novel *The Natural Way of Things*. Set in an unnamed place in the Australian outback, it recounts the story of 10 girls in their late teens and early twenties who are kept prisoners by a mysterious corporate organisation for their sexual involvement with an array of powerful men. The novel’s title invites two main readings: the first, and perhaps more obvious, along gender lines; and the second, which will provide the backbone to my analysis, within the framework of the natural world, the animal kingdom in particular. *The Natural Way of Things* has been described as a study in contemporary misogyny and the workings of patriarchy. The ingrained sexism of society—the insidious, normalised violence against females, often blamed on them, glossing over male responsibility—is undoubtedly the central topic of Wood’s work. Without losing sight of gender issues, my approach to Wood’s novel is inspired by Rosi Braidotti’s posthuman theories on the continuum nature–culture and the primacy of *zoe*—“the non-human, vital force of life”—over *bios*, or life as “the prerogative of *Anthropos*” (Rosi Braidotti). According to Braidotti, the current challenges to anthropocentrism question the distinction between these two forms of life, highlighting instead the seamless connection between the natural world and culture and favouring a consideration of the subject as embodied, nomadic and relational. My reading of *The Natural Way of Things* in light of Braidotti’s insights will be supplemented by an analysis of the novel in the context of transmodernity, both a period term and a distinct way of being in the world theorised by critics such as Rosa M. Rodríguez Magda and Marc Luyckx, who emphasise the relational, interdependent nature of contemporary times from a more human-centred perspective. *The Natural Way of Things* is also a story of female empowerment. This is especially the case with Yolanda Kovacs and Verla Learmont, the two protagonist women, who step out of their roles as victims and stand up to their guards. My analysis of the novel will revolve around these two characters and their different reactions to confinement and degradation. I conclude that although a more *zoe*-centred conception of the human subject that acknowledges the human–animal continuum should definitely be welcomed, literally “becoming animal”, as Yolanda does, deprives one of meaningful human relationality, embodied in the novel in Verla’s memories of her caring, empathic relationship with her father.

**Keywords:** posthumanism; postanthropocentrism; transmodernity; relationality; feminism; dystopia

## 1. Introduction: The Natural Way of Things

Those acquainted with *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Margaret Atwood’s (Atwood [1985] 1998) Ur female/feminist dystopia (Delistraty 2019), through either the novel itself or, most probably, Bruce Miller’s television series, will be familiar with the old-fashioned visor bonnets the protagonists of Charlotte Wood’s 2015 novel are forced to wear. Set in an unnamed place in the Australian outback, *The Natural Way of Things* tells the story of 10 girls in their late teens and early twenties, who are kept prisoners by a mysterious corporate organisation named Hardings International for their sexual involvement with an array of powerful men. As a dystopia, the flip side of utopia, *The Natural Way of Things* has its idiosyncrasies. Unlike Atwood’s Gilead, a totalitarian state in the near future, in

Wood's novel the action unfolds in contemporary times and concerns a small community kept away from society. Whether the purpose of Hardings' detention centre, run by three warders—two males and a female—is to rehabilitate the young women or simply to wreak revenge on them is not made explicit. The girls, all apparently white, have their heads shaved on arrival—like the inmates of Nazi concentration camps—and must dress in “strange prairie workhouse” tunics (Wood 2015, p. 23), most unsuitable for the very hot weather (p. 32) and the heavy manual work they are made to perform. The place looks like “a sheep station, or maybe a wheat farm” (p. 69), a remnant of Australia's colonial past, and is encircled by a tall impassable electric fence, which evokes Australia's notorious refugee and asylum-seeker detention centres as well as its infamous segregation and assimilation policies with respect to the native population. “The very act of incarceration”, Anne Brewster and Sue Kossew write on Wood's novel, “is depicted as scandalous (because meaningless and cruel) but this scandal recalls the fact that incarceration has been a common and normalised experience for so many refugee and Indigenous women in Australia since colonisation” (Brewster and Kossew 2019, p. 24).

The novel's title—*The Natural Way of Things*—invites two main readings. The first follows along the lines of Brewster and Kossew's use of the word “normal” as something that has become ordinary or usual after a time, despite its intrinsically aberrant nature. “Ordinary”, says Aunt Julia in *The Handmaid's Tale*, “is what you are used to. This may not seem ordinary to you now, but after a time it will. It will become ordinary” (Atwood [1985] 1998, p. 43). The following fragment from Wood's external narrator, by and large impersonal in its rendering of the story but here making its way into the diegesis, supports this first reading:

What would people in their old lives be saying about these girls? Would they be called *missing*? ... Would it be said, they ‘disappeared’, ‘were lost’? 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 on them. (Wood 2015, p. 176; first and second emphasis in the original; third mine)

Several considerations can be made in light of this quotation, like the fact that it taps into a staple fear in the Australian imaginary often reflected in the continent's letters, namely, that of the lost child. This was a frequent concern in colonial times but nowadays also evokes the Indigenous children removed from their homes to be brought up in institutions or white foster families, known as the Stolen Generations. The excerpt, however, revolves on the whole around gender issues: the insidious, normalised violence against females, as old as time itself, often blamed on them, glossing over male responsibility, as the use of the passive voice makes sufficiently clear. This ingrained sexism of society is undoubtedly the central topic of Wood's work.

The entry for the novel in the author's official webpage gathers fragments from a long list of reviews, describing it in similar terms as an “exploration of contemporary misogyny” that “takes apart the mentality of patriarchy” (Wood n.d.). Significantly, the reviewer for *The Economist* defines it as a “haunting parable of contemporary misogyny ... *The Handmaid's Tale* for our age of sensational media and reality television ... a preview of what could happen to women who rock the boat, resisting predation or asserting their own sexual freedom” (Wood n.d.). Susan Wyndham (2019), in a more recent review of Wood's 2019 novel *The Weekend*, retrospectively alludes to the significance of the earlier work: “The novel was both sharply contemporary and timeless in its portrayal of women under duress. Wood perfectly captured the zeitgeist, anticipating not only the TV adaptation of Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, but the entire #MeToo movement”. Brewster and Kossew notice that “Wood has drawn the scandals, for which the young women have been incarcerated, from real events in the Australian popular media” (Brewster and Kossew 2019, p. 23). These are “incidents in which women have been belittled, demonised or portrayed as deserving of the violence committed against

them (such as sexual harassment in the workplace, date rape on a cruise ship, gang rape by a football team, being the victims of revenge porn, among others)" (Brewster and Kossew 2019, pp. 23–24).

Nevertheless, *The Natural Way of Things*, Brewster and Kossew remark, "is also a story of female empowerment and counter agency in the face of patriarchal violence" (p. 25). This is especially the case with Yolanda Kovacs and Verla Learmont, the two protagonist women, who cast off their roles as victims and stand up to their guards. At a certain point in the story, electric power is cut off (except for the fence) and the prisoners learn through their wardens that Hardings, the mysterious organization that keeps them incarcerated, are not coming, implying that they are left to starve together, girls and guards (Wood 2015, pp. 118, 125). "The girls can only rescue themselves", a reviewer rightly states on Wood's official webpage (Wood n.d.). According to John Powers, "Yolanda and Verla strip away the historical veneer of female subservience. They recreate themselves based on a deeper, more complicated vision of the natural order, one that grasps the bond between all living beings" (Wood n.d.; my emphases). This takes us to the second main meaning of Wood's title, which will provide the backbone to my approach to the novel, inspired by Rosi Braidotti's posthuman theories on the nature–culture continuum and the primacy of *zoe*—"the non-human, vital force of life" (Braidotti 2018, p. 12)—over *bios*, or life as "the prerogative of Anthropos" (p. 5). These two terms, as Giorgio Agamben (Agamben [1995] 1998) explains in *Homo Sacer*, are to be traced back to classical Greece:

The Greeks had no single term to express what we mean by the word "life." They used two terms that, although traceable to a common etymological root, are semantically and morphologically distinct: *zoē*, which expressed the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods), and *bios*, which indicated the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group. (Agamben [1995] 1998, p. 9)

The current challenges to anthropocentrism, states Braidotti, question "the separation of *bios*, life as the prerogative of humans, from *zoe*, the life of animals and nonhuman entities". "What has come to the fore, instead, in the past decades", she adds, "is a nature-culture continuum that affects ... the vision of the embodied, embedded, relational, and affective structure of the nonunitary, nomadic, and extended self" (Braidotti 2016, p. 381). In her seminal monograph *The Posthuman*, Braidotti clearly affirms her commitment to posthumanism through the following personal statement: "that in me which no longer identifies with the dominant categories of subjectivity, but which is not yet completely out of the cage of identity, that is to say that which goes on differing, is at home with *zoe*, the post-anthropocentric subject" (Braidotti 2013, p. 80). It is precisely her awareness of "what it means to be embodied female" (p. 80)—"I am a she-wolf, a breeder that multiplies cells in all directions; I am an incubator and a carrier of vital and lethal viruses; I am mother-earth, the generator of the future" (p. 80)—that put her on the path of the posthuman, as she explains: "The becoming-posthuman speaks to my feminist self, partly because my sex, historically speaking, never quite made it into full humanity, so my allegiance to that category is at best negotiable and never to be taken for granted" (p. 81).

My reading of *The Natural Way of Things* along Braidotti's insights will be supplemented by an analysis of the novel in the context of transmodernity, both a period term and a distinct way of being in the world theorised by critics such as Rosa M. Rodríguez Magda and Marc Luyckx, also emphasising the relational, interdependent nature of contemporary times from a more human-centred perspective. In the opinion of Luyckx—former member of the Forward Studies Unit of the European Commission under Jacques Delors—women across the world are indispensable in pushing for the transmodern mindset (Luyckx 2010, p. 31), still a minority paradigm, defined by "respect for Mother Nature, care for communities, for family relations, for internal growth, for other cultures, desire for another economic logic, etc." (p. 40). Transmodernity, for Rodríguez Magda, is "the paradigm that allows us to think our present" (Rodríguez Magda 2019, p. 21), defined as a dialectical synthesis of the modern thesis and the postmodern antithesis and characterised, among other things, by supportive, caring individualism (Rodríguez Magda 2011, p. 9). In "Transmodernidad: un nuevo paradigma" (pp. 1–3), Rodríguez Magda traces the genealogy of a concept gestated mainly in Spanish- and French-speaking cultural contexts but currently making its way in Anglophone criticism. She underlines the need to

develop a consistent theory accounting for the changes that characterise the contemporary moment, which, she firmly believes, point to a true paradigm shift (Rodríguez Magda 2011, p. 3). In line with Braidotti, Rodríguez Magda, as well as other proponents of the transmodern paradigm, questions the ideals of modernity and the Enlightenment—whose many contradictions were convincingly exposed by postmodern thinkers—however, she does not completely discard them. In the wake of Jürgen Habermas, Magda seems to regard modernity as an unfinished project, since transmodernity, for her, is “a fluid return of a new configuration of the previous stages” (p. 8; my translation). “We cannot, for reasons of mere subsistence, remain in relativism”, she writes “but neither must we resurrect absolute beliefs” (Rodríguez Magda 2019, p. 28). In “The Crossroads of Transmodernity,” she distinguishes between “narratives of celebration”—those that work towards consolidating the dominant discourse—and “narratives of the limit,” which reveal the cracks in the *zeitgeist* (p. 21). Rodríguez Magda welcomes narratives “of the limit, of resistance, that might reconstruct those regulative ideals in which to recognise ourselves, that might preserve that fragile life that we are as a planet and as individuals” (p. 28). Coinciding with Magda’s concern with our future on Earth, Irena Ateljevic in “Visions of Transmodernity: A New Renaissance of our Human History?” provides evidence of “an emerging and significant paradigm shift in human evolution” (Ateljevic 2013, p. 200). She draws on Rifkin and (Luyckx) Ghisi, for whom, she summarises, transmodernity can be described as “a planetary vision in which humans are beginning to realize that we are all (including plants and animals) connected into one system, which makes us all interdependent, vulnerable and responsible for the Earth as an indivisible living community” (p. 203; original emphasis). The following words by Susana Onega and Jean-Michel Ganteau on novels that take up a transmodern stance reveal continuities between Braidotti’s emphasis on *zoe* and the tenets of transmodernity and advance some big issues in *The Natural Way of Things*, especially the interconnection between all forms of life:

They postulate a continuum between all living things, from the mineral and vegetal to the human through the animal world. Such a vision implies considering all life forms as just that: living entities; ... hence vulnerable creatures. Needless to say, the presentation of such a vulnerability provides an ethical response, since vulnerability excludes autonomy and calls for a vision of subjects and beings as interconnected and, more specifically, interdependent. (Onega and Ganteau 2020, p. 16)

My analysis of Wood’s novel alongside these two major theoretical frameworks—posthumanism and transmodernity—reinforces the feminist approaches mentioned earlier in the article, especially that by Brewster and Kossew, since both Braidotti’s brand of posthumanism and Magda and Luyckx’s transmodernity harbour critical gender concerns. The focus will be largely on the characters of Yolanda and Verla and their different reactions to confinement and degradation on their way to empowerment. The two of them undertake, as we shall see, a revision of the ideas of the natural and the human, which I will analyse as sharing a common basis connecting *bios* and *zoe*, much in line with the concept of the embodied empowered female and the post-anthropocentric nomadic subject. In this, *The Natural Way of Things* poses a challenge to classic anthropocentrism, which, as Braidotti observes, has traditionally excluded women from full humanity and has privileged culture over nature with the subsequent exclusion of other-than-human animals. The paths of the two protagonists, however, increasingly diverge, with Yolanda moving to the part of the spectrum closer to *zoe*, while Verla draws strength from meaningful human practices anchored in the relational.

My essay is divided into two main sections: “Becoming Animal” and “At home with *zoe*”. The first explores Yolanda’s turn to animality mostly drawing on Braidotti’s theory of the posthuman but also resorting to Rifkin’s ideas on empathy and animal rights, closer to the transmodern mindset in that they do not challenge the primacy of the human (Rifkin 2009, p. 468). As I shall explain in greater detail, Rifkin interprets the extension of empathy to animals as proof of a new biosphere consciousness boosting the empathic spectrum of humans (p. 470). The second section concerns Verla, briefly returning to Yolanda when analysing the ending of the novel. Without losing sight of the vital force of life, this section fully revolves around relationality—prompted by Verla’s memories of her father back



home—as conceived by transmodern thinkers and other scholars in the orbit of transmodernity. I argue that, despite the fact that Wood’s novel highlights the nature–culture continuum and acknowledges the significance of *zoe*, it is the turn to the relational in the form of empathy and care that it finally supports.

## 2. Becoming Animal

The *Cambridge Dictionary* defines “natural” in the following words: “as found in nature and not involving anything made or done by people” ([Cambridge Dictionary n.d.](#)). The natural world, animals in particular, plays a key role in Wood’s novel. According to [Wyndham \(2019\)](#), “animals are central to Wood’s work”, primarily “as a mirror and a moral test for humans”. Native and non-native fauna populates the scene, from the kookaburras mentioned in the opening sentence, to the wild rabbits they feed on ([Wood 2015](#), p. 141), through to kangaroos (p. 135), goannas (p. 104) and the lice infesting the girls’ newly-grown hair (p. 105). Besides autochthonous and imported specimens, the story, through Verla, alludes to fantastic creatures, like the unicorn on a tapestry in Paris her lover takes her to see (p. 186), and semi-real, heavily symbolic animals such as the white horse she believes will bring her freedom (p. 153), the bloody lamb’s head she dreams of donning when the moment for revenge offers itself (pp. 245, 252–253), as well as the “little brown trout” (p. 196) that visits her in her fever dreams and is, again, enigmatically brought up in the haiku-like closing sentences of the novel.

Despite the high-sounding motto of Hardings International printed on the kitchenware—“DIGNITY & RESPECT IN A SAFE & SECURE ENVIRONMENT” (p. 46; original capitals)—the women are treated like animals, leashed to one another and sleeping in small, kennel-like cells (p. 54). “The girls breathe thorough their mouths like animals”, Verla notices ... “Verla is not an animal” (p. 46). The lover of a cabinet minister called Andrew and a “parliamentary intern, a rightful citizen”, she feels superior to the other girls in terms of class and education and is sure she will be released soon: “When his staff treachery is discovered and Andrew gets her out, when she’s released (not *rescued*, that word for stupid princesses and children), she will advocate for these girls” (p. 56; original emphasis). As the narrative progresses and the guards start to lose control of the situation, the word “animal” acquires a different, more empowering meaning in connection with Verla and, above all, Yolanda, who picks a bunch of old rusty rabbit traps and sets out to provide food for them. Verla can sense what Teddy, one of the two men in charge, feels and thinks: “He frowns down and Verla knows he is thinking *ugh* at the two filthy girls, that he is freshly fearful of the lice eggs in their matted hair, of Verla stretched white with illness, of Yolanda and her rusted weaponry. He fears their thin feral bodies, their animal disease and power” (p. 150; original emphasis).

Yolanda Kovacs is described at the beginning of the novel as an exotic beauty, a strong, fearless 19-year-old (p. 16), who was delivered to this “girls’ prison ... in the middle of fucking nowhere” (p. 50) by her brother Darren in collusion with her boyfriend Robbie for “*completely unacceptable*” behaviour (p. 91; original emphasis). From early in the story Yolanda is associated with animals. In contrast to the other girls, Yolanda tells Verla with pride, she was not tricked into coming to the institution, she fought (p. 91): “Like always, her dumb dog’s *body* knew ... and then the large hands came gripping and it was her body kicking like fuck and spitting and screaming” (p. 92; original emphasis). She is depicted as having an instinct, “same as happened among the hens in her nana’s chook yard” (p. 75), and Verla, measuring herself against her friend, thinks: “at the same moment as Yolanda roared and kicked and bit ... Verla complied. *She is stronger than me*” (pp. 93–94; original emphasis). When electric power is cut off and they cannot even boil the dry noodles they have as their only food, Yolanda goes rabbit hunting. She sets her traps every day, demonstrating her abilities at the traditionally masculine role of hunter and provider (pp. 163, 167, 259). She knows both women prisoners and warders now depend on her: “This is what makes Yolanda strong: the knowledge that without her, without her traps, they would have all perished by now. Only Yolanda is keeping them alive” (p. 172). Besides, in her new role, she manages to keep Boncer, the second male guard, at bay: “You will never—*ever*—touch me” (p. 143; original emphasis). In her previous life, she had been the victim of a gang rape she did not dare report: “She did not move, she did not cry out, she would be blamed” (p. 223). Yolanda and

Verla, the two alternating focalisers and the main objects of analysis, stand apart from the other more superficial and mundane girls: “Yolanda and Verla hold themselves apart, for survival. This is their bond” (p. 94). In fact, in a sense, they act as complementary characters, as when Verla takes on a new role as an avid forager of mushrooms, first, with the aim of finding a poisonous one and serve it to Boncer—as she does, though accidentally, at the end of the novel—but also providing a nourishing side dish for Yolanda’s rabbits.

Progressively, all characters change, their civilised selves dwindling as months go by: “How altered they are. Now, when Verla tries to remember herself, that long-ago girl struggling to the surface of her sedation . . . she cannot. It is as if she’s trying to inhabit some other creature, some impossible existence, like that of a cuttlefish, a worm, a tree” (Wood 2015, p. 257). The concepts of *bios* and *zoe* come in handy and help cast some light on the process of change Verla and Yolanda undergo. In *The Natural Way of Things*, the decay of *bios* in favour of *zoe* is graphically embodied in the “rags torn from Hardings tea towels” Teddy, the guard, ties up his dreadlocks with: “DIGNIT and PECT and ONMENT, reads the tiny blue print on torn white linen rags” (p. 104). Despite the decomposition of Hardings’ pompous motto, laying bare the hypocrisy of the corporation, *bios*, as the voice of culture, still has a saying in the daily life of the group. For instance, the girls’ attempts at skinning and cooking the rabbits Yolanda brings are ineffectual until one of them remembers celebrity chef Jamie Oliver’s famous TV cooking programmes (p. 165).

Of all the young women, Yolanda is the most changed, as evident in the following quotation:

Yolanda felt some primitive strength mounting as she scrubbed and stretched, as she marched the paddocks and set and sprang the traps. It was a vigour to do with air, and the earth. Animal blood and guts, the moon and the season. It was beyond her named self, beyond *girl*, or *female*. Beyond human, even. It was to do with muscle sliding around bone, to do with animal speed and scent and bloody heartbeat and breath. (Wood 2015, p. 193; original emphasis)

Yolanda has become the embodiment of “life as *zoe*, as positive vitality”, in Braidotti’s words (Braidotti 2014, p. 175). In the face of the other girls, she is invested with a kind of natural authority—“They looked to Yolanda for what to do now” (Wood 2015, p. 164)—and Verla notices she is healthier than the rest: “she has blood in her cheeks, is fit from the walking and carrying” (p. 171). Once more, Braidotti’s insights prove to be useful. As mentioned before, one of the pillars of her posthuman theory is the questioning of “the binary opposition between the given and the constructed”, which she believes is “currently being replaced by a non-dualistic understanding of nature-culture interaction” (Braidotti 2013, p. 7), “a ‘naturecultures’ continuum . . . which also brings to an end the categorical distinction between life as *bios* . . . as distinct from . . . *zoe*” (Braidotti 2018, pp. 4–5). The posthuman, for her, supports new forms of subjectivity (Braidotti 2013, p. 8), engages “affirmatively with the present” (p. 9), provides tools for resisting “the inhuman(e) aspects of our era” (p. 8) and “can also help us re-think the basic tenets of our interaction with both human and non-human agents on a planetary scale” (p. 9). Braidotti registers the many failures of the humanistic ideal, “a universalistic ideal that . . . had reached the status of a natural law” (p. 22), “highly regulatory and hence instrumental to practices of exclusion and discrimination” (p. 24). “My anti-humanism”, she asserts, “leads me to object to the unitary subject of Humanism . . . and to replace it with a more complex and relational subject framed by embodiment, sexuality, affectivity, empathy and desire as core qualities” (p. 24). Interestingly for the purpose of this essay, in her view, “the relational capacity of the posthuman subject is not confined within our species, but it includes all non-anthropomorphic elements”, reconnecting “previously segregated species, categories and domains” (p. 60). My analysis of *The Natural Way of Things* intends to point out the value of the relational in the novel and how it is constitutive of the subject in ways that transcend boundaries between species, highlighting the essential inseparableness of *bios* and *zoe*.

Animals are among those to suffer the most from the anthropocentric views of classical humanism. The Spanish philosopher and poet Jorge Riechmann describes “modern livestock factories” as

“extermination camps and torture chambers for animals” (Riechmann 2020, p. xv). Braidotti further records some of the terrible practices animals presently endure in our culture: “They are manipulated, mistreated, tortured, ... sold as exotic commodities, ... bred in industrial farming, locked up in battery-cage production units” (Braidotti 2013, p. 11). Post-anthropocentrism, then, constitutes for her an opportunity to rethink our relationships with non-human animals in radically different terms: “‘Life’, far from being codified as the exclusive property or the unalienable right of one species, the human, over all others ... , is posited as process, interactive and open-ended” (p. 60). Braidotti embraces a “vitalist approach to living matter” that “displaces the boundary between the portion of life ... that has traditionally been reserved for anthropos, that is to say *bios*, and the wider scope of animal and non-human life, also known as *zoe*” (p. 60). “Zoe-centred egalitarianism” is, for her, “the core of the post-anthropocentric turn” (p. 60), key in curbing speciesism—discrimination against non-human animals—as well as sexism. “Sexism and speciesism”, states Margarita Carretero-González summarising Alicia Puleo’s study of violence in patriarchal cultures, “refuse to see human females and other-than-human animals of whatever gender as sentient individuals with complex inner worlds, reducing them, instead, to objectified bodies” (Carretero-González 2020, p. xxv). That Charlotte Wood speaks up against sexism is sufficiently clear. The way she portrays the two main characters’ relationships with non-human animals is much more complex and nuanced than her criticism of sex discrimination, featuring a mild form of speciesism brought about by their sheer need for food, combined with an extreme kind of zoe-centred egalitarianism in the figure of Yolanda, at the same time as it acknowledges the continuity and the interpenetration between life as *bios* and life as *zoe*.

The hunting and eating of rabbits saves the characters in *The Natural Way of Things* from starving and, at a deeper level, connects them, especially the two protagonist women, with a new force, both primitive and powerful: “Something ancient throbbed in Yolanda. She had trapped an animal, and now she would skin it, and eat it” (Wood 2015, p. 157); “She examined herself for signs of remorse: she found only some smouldering, some ember” (p. 158); “Verla’s mouth flooded for it: this holy thing; protein, life” (p. 173). Basically, resorting to hunting in order to survive, they seem to feel part of the natural cycle of life and death that rules the animal kingdom. Yolanda’s attitude towards animals, however, evolves throughout the story, first into greater empathy, and second and more shockingly, into total identification with the animal world, especially that of rabbits. The following quotation describing how she releases a dead rabbit from her trap clearly illustrates her empathic move: “She held its head briefly in her palm, feeling the weight of it and looking into its black eye. Sorry, she said to him silently. *Thank you*. She had found she had begun to feel differently about the rabbits over the past weeks” (p. 179; original emphasis). On another occasion, Yolanda holding a dying kangaroo in her lap evokes in Verla the image of Michelangelo’s *Pietà* (p. 265). Yolanda’s empathy towards animals, elevated to the status of sentient beings, is sometimes, however, too contaminated by her human preconceptions. This becomes clear when she takes under her protection a “hunched, quivering rabbit” giving birth in the cold and the rain (p. 209), pushing it under her tunic in the belief that it is a safe warm place: “She would warm it with her own body, calm it. But the rabbit kicked at her stomach” (p. 210). In the end, the doe delivers a litter of stillborn rabbit kits (p. 216).

Braidotti is in two minds with respect to the growth in empathy towards animals in contemporary times, apparent in the fact that political parties for animals are currently on the rise, as well as in the burgeoning animal rights movement. On the one hand, she regards the emphasis on empathy across the species as “extremely relevant for a posthuman theory of the subject” and as a “significant addition to the theory of the nature-culture continuum” (Braidotti 2013, p. 78). In fact, as quoted previously in my argument (p. 24), Braidotti lists empathy as an attribute of the new posthuman subject:

The emphasis on empathy accomplishes several significant goals in view of a posthuman theory of subjectivity. Firstly, it reappraises communication as an evolutionary tool. Secondly, it identifies in emotions, rather than in reason, the key to consciousness. Thirdly, it develops what Harry Kunneman has defined as ‘a hermeneutical form of naturalism’ which takes

critical distance from the tradition of social constructivism and situates moral values as innate qualities. (Braidotti 2013, p. 78)

On the other hand, for Braidotti, this movement is, at heart, a form of “compensatory humanism”, an attempt “to reassess the validity of a number of humanist values”, established during the Enlightenment, but “previously reserved for humans only, to the detriment of all non-human agents such as animals and plants” (p. 76). “In this cross-species embrace”, she believes, “Humanism is actually being reinstated uncritically under the aegis of species egalitarianism” (p. 79). Writing on the animal rights movement, she affirms that

Anthropomorphizing them so as to extend to animals the principle of moral and legal equality may be a noble gesture, but it is inherently flawed, on two scores. Firstly, it confirms the binary distinction human/animal by benevolently extending the hegemonic category, the human, towards the others. Secondly, it denies the specificity of animals altogether, because it uniformly takes them as emblems of the trans-species, universal ethical value of empathy. (Braidotti 2013, p. 79)

Although I perfectly understand, and partly share, Braidotti’s views on animals as radical others, and hence unassimilable in Levinasian terms, as well as her insistence on not losing sight of the pitfalls of classical humanism—hinted at in the novel in Yolanda’s interfering with the doe, among other things—I am closer to the ideas of Jeremy Rifkin on the subject. In his *The Empathic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis*, Rifkin gauges the progress made by humanity in terms of empathy and sees the current concern with animals as proof of this new empathic awareness (Rifkin 2009, p. 26). He welcomes as revolutionary the “sudden and powerful emergence of the animal rights movement—a force that was virtually non-existent forty years ago” (p. 468). Despite the fact that animal-rights activists, Rifkin asserts, “acknowledge that the rights of other creatures differ in degree and kind from human rights, they are steadfast in the belief that their individual journey is no less significant and meaningful than our own” (p. 468). Rifkin interprets this as part of “an emerging biosphere consciousness grounded in personal participation, emotional identification, and empathic extension” (p. 469). He acknowledges the dangers of “sentimentalizing and anthropomorphizing the human-animal bond” (p. 469), like Disney productions, for instance, famously do, but all in all believes this has also very much contributed to opening up “a new empathic domain for human consciousness” (p. 470), “a significant milestone for the human race” (p. 472). Similarly, Carretero-González, as well as other scholars, registers what she calls an “animal turn”, “led by philosophers, particularly those working in the field of ethics, as well as ecocritics, scholars who look into the literary and cultural representations of the relationships between humans and the more-than-human world” (Carretero-González 2020, p. xxiv). My reading of *The Natural Way of Things* highlights some aspects compatible with the views of Rifkin, like the growing empathy towards animals within the realm of the humans, and situates the novel in the wake of the turn to animals flagged up by Carretero-González. The main characters’ growing concern with the animal world is proof of the extension of empathy beyond the human sphere, while, at the same time, the fact that they feed on the meat of the rabbits Yolanda hunts seems to endorse a ranking of human and non-human animal rights. More disturbingly, Yolanda’s embracing of the life of a rabbit shows the perils of fully committing oneself to *zoe* to the detriment of *bios*.

Yolanda’s drift towards animality situates her on the edge of the community. The pungent smell her body and the rabbit skins that cover it give off disgusts the other women: “her own smell beginning to merge with the animals’ . . . made the other girls hold their noses and make noises as they shoved past her” (Wood 2015, p. 189). Becoming animal is her way out of imprisonment: “At night she 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” (p. 237). By the end of the novel, Yolanda is “almost all animal” (p. 284). She rarely speaks and has taken to



living on the paddocks: “Yolanda no longer comes into the house at all. She eats with her hands, sitting on the veranda, leaving bowls liked and bones scattered for the rats” (Wood 2015, p. 292). Her radical form of “zoe-egalitarianism between humans and animals” (Braidotti 2013, p. 71) is not, however, without trouble, especially for her, but also for the community of girls. At some point in the narrative, when out on the fields setting her traps, she catches sight of a hot-air balloon, “swimming through the sky towards her” (p. 239), close enough to be seen and heard by the people in it. “She would cry out, *We are prisoners. Get help*” (p. 239; original emphasis), but she can only roar up at them, “waving her rabbit-mitted hands in the air” (p. 240). Her “trapped-animal’s cry” (p. 240) fails to establish meaningful communication with the humans as the balloon spins away. Yolanda has not only renounced language, with the dire consequences just explained, she has also somewhat relinquished empathy and moral action. By the end of the novel, she fails to stop one of the girls, pregnant by a guard, on her way to the electric fence to commit suicide: “She watched Hetty’s slow crawl up the hill, . . . not raising the alarm, not giving chase, not trying to save Hetty. The Yolanda who might once have done those things—who ran after the balloon . . . —that Yolanda might also at least have whispered, *Goodbye, Hetty*, but she did not whisper anything” (p. 276). Her friend Verla witnesses her process of animalisation and believes her mad: “She suddenly wants to cry out . . . for Yolanda, gone mad with rabbit filth and guts. She cries for the ordinary girl Yolanda once was, who will never return” (p. 219). Theirs, Verla realises, is no longer a form of human friendship but more like the “bodily, speechless way of a man and his dog” (p. 257).

### 3. “At Home with Zoe”

The character of Verla also evolves during captivity. Amid fantasies of revenge on one of the guards, Verla matures and accepts the painful truth that Andrew, her politician lover, never loved anybody but himself and that he will send no one to release her. Even though, in contrast with Yolanda, she remains within the spectrum of the human, her evolution also brings to the fore the underlying continuity between *bios* and *zoe*: “She’s a creature of the animals, of kangaroo and horse; she is a little brown trout very still in the water” (p. 138). Her communion with animals is extended to the world of plants: “They are not sluts or prisoners. Not even girls, here, but something like seeds, blown by the wind” (p. 255). Moreover, there are various scenes in which contemplating nature provides an immense source of pleasure for her, as when she “looks up into the frail glimmer of the sun, . . . and would like to thank it” (p. 255). As Riechmann puts it, “we are interdependent and ecodependent in a world made up of complex adaptive systems” (Riechmann 2020, p. xii). More and more, Verla is visited by memories of her disabled father and misses caring for him as she used to: “Her father, what would he be doing now? He will miss her, speechlessly, and nobody will know. . . . There were days she would wheel him down to the jetty and park him there while she smoked, and then unwrap the fish-and-chip paper and feed each sliver into his grinning, vulnerable mouth” (Wood 2015, p. 246); “she sends him out a prayer: *I am still your daughter*” (p. 248; original emphasis).

The whole novel is dotted by instances of empathy and care, sparse at the beginning but more visible and significant as the story progresses. Early in the novel, all the girls cry out when one of them is brutally beaten by a guard (p. 24), and two girls “gently [take] her elbows and [raise] her to stand” (p. 25). At night, locked up in their kennel-like cells, they call out to one another (p. 55) and pass their stories “through the thin tin walls” (p. 56). They comfort each other while they cry “for their mothers and fathers, for home” (p. 94). On one occasion, the women break out singing and drumming, led by Joy, who got eliminated from a TV singing contest after rejecting “Gordo’s fatherly ‘bear hugs’” (p. 107):

Drumbeat rises from the boards beneath Lydia’s heavy boot, and then Rhiannon joins her, a hollow tribal booming from the tin wall of her cell. Then Maitlynd starts drumming too, and then Barbs, and this deep jungle beat seems to rise up from the earth itself, spreading through the fibres of the floors and walls, through their bodies, along the cells from girl to girl, and above it Joy’s voice climbs, and soon the whole kennel building is thumping with this belly-driven rhythmic song. (Wood 2015, p. 109)

Significantly, when the drumbeat “eases and quietens and stops”, the only sound is “Joy’s pure human voice” (Wood 2015, p. 109; my emphasis). This is not the only time the narrative highlights meaningful, purely human practices. When Nancy, the third, mentally unstable, warder, dies of a morphine overdose, the girls carefully wash her body, wipe her face and comb back her hair, in preparation for the funeral pyre (p. 270): “They have hated Nancy, wished her dead, . . . But now . . . they see she is only one of them, . . . and for the first time they wonder if she has a mother too” (p. 271). Her funeral turns into a powerful communal ceremony: “the girls huddle closer together, arms about each other’s shoulders. Tending the fire, keeping watch, holding vigil. Joy sings clear and low” (p. 271). The natural cycle of life and death feels complete when, in the light of the bonfire, the girls’ notice Hetty’s pregnancy: “One body disintegrates in flame and another forms in water, cell by cell by duplicating cell” (p. 273). It is significant that the two male warders do not take part in the ritual. “Here”, the narrator remarks, “laying the dead to rest, like washing and feeding and birth, is women’s work” (p. 273). I suggest reading these practices against María del Carmen García Aguilar’s all-embracing kind of ethics, an ethics that fully accounts for the experience of women (García Aguilar 2013, p. 99). Partaking of the insights of transmodern theory, García Aguilar advocates for an inclusive vision, in consonance with the new times, at the same time that it promotes values traditionally associated with women such as care and solidarity. For her, transmodernity constitutes the bridge between the historical paradigms of modernity and postmodernity, providing opportunities for revisiting and revising some of the issues modernity failed to resolve, especially but not only, the full inclusion of women (p. 97). This new form of ethics, she believes, can help ameliorate relationships between humans as well as with the ecosystem as a whole (p. 99), two major concerns in Wood’s novel. Boncer’s illness and death, after accidentally eating the poisonous mushroom Verla reserves for herself, provide another glimpse of our common humanity as well as a new occasion to portray some of the characters engaged in caring practices: “Izzy takes pity first, cleaning his arse, washing him in the tepid tank water, emptying his vomit bowls away” (Wood 2015, p. 291). Verla takes over nursing and comforting him: “He has brought it on himself, but Verla cannot help taking his pale hand in hers, and holding it” (p. 293). Looking after Boncer brings about memories of her father once more: “She thinks of all the times she held her father’s sad old hand, and for a fleeting moment she holds Boncer’s to her lips” (p. 293). “His mother looks so normal”, says Leandra when they find a family picture in his wallet (pp. 291, 292). It is precisely his mother Boncer whimpers for in his final agony (p. 293), adding to the novel’s back to basics call.

In my opinion, the situations and practices described in the previous paragraph appear as traversed by the *zoe-bios*/nature–culture continuum. They evoke vulnerability as a shared condition of existence at the same time that they present human beings—women in this case—as symbolic animals in need of meaningful social rites and ceremonies. In other words, they show the characters at home with *zoe* while not losing their grip on the specifically human. Above all, these examples home in on significant relationality, which, as mentioned early in the essay, constitutes a defining characteristic of transmodernity. Under the aegis—although not necessarily under the label—of transmodernity, studies proliferate that foreground relatedness, interdependence and vulnerability, like Judith Butler’s *Precarious Life* (Butler 2004), written in response to the New York 9/11 attacks; Virginia Held’s ethics of care (Held 2006), an attempt, like García Aguilar’s, to highlight the important contribution of values traditionally considered female; and those of critics who speak of a current turn to relationality in fiction, such as Christian Moraru’s cosmodernism in the context of US letters (Moraru 2011), and Nicholas Birns’s analysis of Australian novelists of concern (Birns 2015, pp. 126–155), a literary manifestation, he defends, of the relational turn in psychology led by Axel Honneth (Birns 2015, p. 123). Writing in the context of our relations with non-human animals, Riechman also advocates for an ethics of care that transcends relationships among human beings. He rescues from oblivion Étienne de La Boétie’s “politics of friendship” as a way out of the path of domination: “We have no other good way out. We know that we have been expelled from the Garden of Eden—we cannot be hunter-gatherers again, and even less so prehuman animals—and we also know that there is no possible return”

(Riechmann 2020, p. xiii). Riechmann also draws upon Albert Schweitzer's "reverence for life"—"I am life that wants to live, in the midst of life that wants to live"—(in xiv) and adds the qualifier "conscious" to round it off with:

As a human being, I am conscious life that wants to live. I am life that, in the course of evolution, has reached awareness, understands its situation, and knows that it is up to its own behaviour—that of the animal called *Homo sapiens*, ... —whether suffering increases or diminishes in its biospheric home, or even whether it remains a welcoming home for thousands of millions of living creatures rather than a progressively hostile and impoverished planet. (Riechmann 2020, p. xiv; original emphasis)

All these studies spanning relations among the different species on Earth and emphasising their interconnectedness and the responsibility of humans in the preservation of life, together with related literary representations, supplement the transmodern worldview and provide an apt framework for the interpretation of important aspects in Wood's novel, aspects that acquire special visibility and relevance in its closing pages.

According to reviewers, the ending of *The Natural Way of Things* is ambivalent. Powers writes: "I'd like to tell you that this is a happy ending, but Wood is too honest to offer anything so reassuringly easy. Even as her heroines begin a radical new way of living, Wood knows that the natural way of things is as risky and wild as it is free" (Wood n.d.). For *The Economist*, the ending is "sly and devastating" (Wood n.d.). "The book's ending", states Ashley Hay, "undid me through the shape of the world it reveals as much as its revisions of escape and survival" (Wood n.d.). Though I admit to a certain degree of ambivalence in Wood's open ending, to my mind, the last few pages prove fundamental in assessing the novel's commitment to a relational view of life. Yes, as Hay affirms, the denouement reveals an ugly world where male chauvinism still holds the lead, but, in revising notions of escape and survival through Yolanda and, especially, Verla's radical choices, the novel opens up new dimensions in understanding the natural way of things. Once the three guards are dead—the third is killed by a girl he has raped—electric power comes suddenly back. The girls expect Hardings to come and "the last nights [are] crazed with celebration" (Wood 2015, p. 298): "It was an awe, filled with longing and wonder, as their old lives came seeping, then trickling, then hurtling back—the jobs, the streets, the houses where they lived. The boyfriends" (p. 296). Only Yolanda, who has come inside to eat, "did not smile, but nibbled on pink rabbit flesh and grunted, as if she always had been this way" (p. 298). The girls giggle picturing her back in the world: "Imagine that filth in an apartment, an office. Imagine Yolanda *shopping*" (p. 298; original emphasis). It seems clear that the scales tip back towards *bios* as the young women prepare themselves to rejoin civilisation and that Yolanda's animalisation excludes her from fitting in. As Riechmann puts it, there is no way back to the prehuman animal (Riechmann 2020, p. xiii).

Soon, Perry, a representative of Hardings turns up driving an unnaturally yellow bus (p. 301). All girls, except Yolanda and Verla, fall happily back into their most superficial form of *bios*, their worshipping of luxury beauty brands, as Perry hands them some presents: "It is *Phaedra*! ... , not only *Phaedra* but, incredibly, form *MarthaJones* and *Nyfödd* and *NaturascienceSeries II*, the man smiling benignly down while they cry out and unscrew bottles and squish creams into their hands and press sticky gloss to their flaking lips with their dirty fingers" (pp. 305–6; original emphasis); "they suck into their lungs the glorious forgotten smell of flowers and herbs and money" (p. 307). Alien to the appeal of consumer capitalism, Yolanda escapes through the fence, "spinning low and fast as a rabbit off into the scrub" (p. 308). In her own animal way, she has invited Verla to join her: "She nods at Verla and jerks her head towards the fields, holding out her dirty mittened hand" (p. 300). But Verla wants to go home: "At home her father waits in his chair, his ghost hand waving" (p. 300). On the bus, however, she repents her decision. She notices the driver take an unexpected turn and realises they might all be taken to an even worse place: "*You poor girls*. This Perry did not mean what had happened to them back there. He meant what was to come" (p. 309). Verla decides to feed herself the little piece of the poisonous mushroom she has kept while she muses on her identity. The question

of who she is has kept her wondering since she arrived at the prison: “I need to know where I am”, she demands of one of the guards; “Oh, sweetie. You need to know *what* you are”, is the answer (Wood 2015, p. 18). Now, at the end of the novel, Verla has reached a degree of self-knowledge that reveals her as a being-in-relation: “She needs to know what she is. She is a daughter, and she whispers sorry to her father as she sees herself doing it . . . She closes her eyes and forgives her mother, says goodbye to her father” (p. 310). It is when she evokes her friend Yolanda—“her protector, fellow creature: *I love you. I am your sister, and you are mine*” (p. 310; original emphasis)—that she feels the call of the wild and is finally able to utter the words “*I refuse*”: “They thrust up through Verla’s centre, bursting into flower in her mouth” (p. 311; original emphasis). In a last communal act, the other girls force Perry to stop the bus and let Verla out in the outback. She knows she might die and that Yolanda is already far away, but thinking of her “so vigorously alive in her rabbit self” sends memories of the little brown trout of her fever dreams (p. 313). Verla “turns away from the setting sun” and “begins trudging down the gravel road” (p. 313). As mentioned earlier in the essay, the novel ends with two sentences that evoke a haiku in their simplicity: “The little trout twitches, and is gone. Only the clear water moves in its wake” (p. 313). Like these sentences, the short Japanese poetic form works by juxtaposing two concrete images from the natural world that efface the personal in favour of the transpersonal. Bruce Ross lists a series of characteristics he considers germane to the essence of haiku: “the particular, feeling and emotion, selflessness, the haiku moment, nature and beauty, and wholeness”. He stresses its deepness, its existential quality and its transformational effect/affect, and summarises the haiku as “an ‘absolute metaphor’ of the natural particular and the universal”. Braidotti’s aiming at a planetary scale, Rodríguez Magda’s hint at the fragility of our life as individuals and as a planet, Ateljevic and Luyckx (Ghisi)’s planetary vision, together with Rifkin and Riechmann’s biosphere consciousness and Moraru’s cosmodernism in the field of letters, all partake of this need to express the subtle link between diverse forms of life. It is the “deeper, more complicated vision of the natural order”, a flash of “the bond between all living beings” pointed out by Powers (Wood n.d.) that is underscored. Thus, at the end of Wood’s novel, in the character of Verla and her little brown trout, the nature–culture continuum, *bios–zoe* acquires a new depth, presenting life not only as open-ended but as radically transcending any kind of dual rational thinking as well through “an awareness of emptiness” (Ross 2007) characteristic of haikus which hints at the underlying, ultimate connection between all that there is.

#### 4. Conclusions

Approaching *The Natural Way of Things* through the synergies between Braidotti’s posthuman theories and the wider transmodern framework has helped cast some light on the continuities between nature and culture the novel is built around. Abducted from civilisation overnight, the group of young women, especially the two heroines, gradually accept those aspects of their selves that are closer to the animal world. “Undoing the human”, Braidotti writes, “does not define a dystopian future condition, but provides a frame to understand the ongoing processes of becoming-subjects in our fast-changing times” (Braidotti 2018, p. 4). Both Verla and Yolanda, who, as women, are painfully acquainted with the dark side of anthropocentrism, go to great lengths in undoing the human in them. Although Yolanda’s fully becoming animal grants her a basic form of survival, “a quiet, animal triumph” (Wood 2015, p. 277), her letting go of the human portion of the continuum *bios–zoe* is depicted partly as an involution, further contributing, in my opinion, to the dystopian undertones of the narrative. Dystopias, hopefully, often hide their own utopian streak. In *The Natural Way of Things*, it is associated with meaningful relationality, one of the axes of the transmodern stance. In fact, Wood’s novel can be read as a narrative of the limit, an attempt, as Rodríguez Magda says, to “reconstruct those regulative ideals in which to recognise ourselves”. Family relations, empathy, solidarity and care for the community gain prominence as the story progresses, mainly associated with the character of Verla but amplified in some of the practices and behaviour of the whole group of girls. The social evils Wood’s story denounces—its ingrained sexism in particular—need to be tackled in the terrain of the



human, knowing that it is always already intimately interpenetrated by the non-human. Verla turns out to be instrumental in bridging the traditional poles of *bios* and *zoe*. Her quest for an identity does not exclude the animal force of life but appears as firmly grounded in her human role, especially that of a daughter and a sisterly friend, until, right at the end of the novel, the human/animal distinction seems to dissolve into a deeper, more basic bond, as the clear water holding the little brown trout in the haiku-like final lines stands for.

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