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**The Watch-Bitch Now: Reassessing the Natural Woman in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*  
and Charlotte Wood's *The Natural Way of Things***

**Abstract:**

This essay provides the first sustained scholarly analysis of two new novels by women: Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* and Charlotte Wood's *The Natural Way of Things*. It argues that these texts, when read together, provide a crucial site for reevaluating the legacies of radical French feminist theory and ecofeminism in the late twentieth century, while also testing some of the limits of recent work in critical animal studies. In both novels, female characters pursue impossible communions with nature: in one, a woman wants to become a tree; in the other, a woman wants to become a rabbit. Kang and Wood radicalize the cultural intimacy between women and nature in exploring the potential of the natural realm—the realm outside the city, in Hélène Cixous's terms, stalked by the watch-bitch, the sphinx—to serve as a refuge from a violently androcentric and anthropocentric world order. Yet the two texts ultimately refuse romanticized notions of the woman in and with nature. They dramatize the risks of a negative epistemology of vulnerability, silence, and alterity that, in different ways, conditions the radical feminist reclamation of the hysteric or madwoman as a figure of protest and the various theorizations of subversive affiliations between humans and animals in ecofeminism, feminist nature writing, and critical animal studies. This essay argues that Kang and Wood's novels reveal in contemporary feminist thought a retrospection of the debates around female madness and silence associated with second wave feminism, especially as they reaffirm the primacy of women's relationships with other women over their being-with nature.

**The Watch-Bitch Now: Reassessing the Natural Woman in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*  
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“[S]he is outside the city, at the edge of the city—the city is man, ruled by masculine law—and there she is.... Watch-bitch, the sphinx was called: she’s an animal and she sings out.”

—Hélène Cixous, “Castration or Decapitation?” (1981, 50)

The woman–dog watches from beyond the city’s bounds, guarding with riddles the space from which she is excluded: the world of culture, politics, language; the precinct of masculine law; the “realm of the proper,” as Hélène Cixous writes, “in which man’s reign is held to be proper” (1981, 50). There she is, anterior and animal, the sphinx, the bitch, standing for the subjugated female body and the subjugated animal body, whose oppressions are commensurate with and regulated through one another. Both women and animals are, as Carol Adams observes, treated as “objects of use and possession” under patriarchal systems of control and in line with the male ideology of transcendent dualism—a somatophobic fiction of the human in distinction to nature that precludes women from the former by affiliating them with the latter (1990, 127). If the associations between women and animals are easy, given a ready-made symbol in the hybrid body of the sphinx, it is because they evince the more wide-reaching association of women and the natural world: all that, animal, vegetal, or otherwise, which is kept out of the realm of the proper. Or, rather, all that which is used in making and sustaining the proper, as man—transcendent, rational, free—wrests cities of forests and makes meals of animals. The woman is outside the city, but she is also “terrain trod by the masculine footstep,” a figure of inertia trampled under “the march of progress” (Cixous 1981, 44).

And then, within the vast workings of Western culture, this opposition of passivity and activity, of natural women and unnatural men, comes to appear as natural, the proper of the proper: the “order of nature,” as Jean-Jacques Rousseau called it. Rousseau believed that nature’s orders made woman innately “docile” and hence proscribed her education alongside men ([1762] 1979, 358, 370). As Mary Wollstonecraft noted in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, Rousseau would have girls and women raised “not as part of the human species” but as “gentle, domestic brutes” ([1792] 1989, 73, 89). The woman–dog is tamed, restrained, made to sit still and keep quiet at the periphery of human society.

How then can she sing out? How can she make herself heard? For Cixous, the song of the sphinx is a poor substitute for the real speech of a woman, inscribed in writing that represents the “identifications of an ego no longer given over to an image defined by the masculine” (1981, 52). Whereas the sphinx chokes out her inchoate song before throwing herself into the sea, *l’écriture féminine* sought to vitalize female difference by casting away “all negativeness”—the marking of woman as a deathly lack, absence, and otherness—“and bring[ing] out a positiveness which might be called the living other” (50). This alternative practice of writing is the invention of women ““in flight’...go[ing] forward by leaps in search of themselves” (52).

In reaching for the open skies of the feminine in the 1970s and 1980s, Cixous and others made heroines of hysterics and witches, reclaiming those whose rebellions—often staged in connection with the natural world—were punished by the laws of the proper. In the literary review *Sorcières*, Xavière Gauthier describes “Lunar, lunatic women, stricken, they say, with period madness. Swollen with lightninglike revolt ... they dance wild dances on the wild moors. Wildwomen, uncivilized, as the white man says of other races. ... They tried to make us believe that women were impotent, immobile, paralyzed. That is because they tried to make women walk a straight line, in lock step, in goose step. In reality, they dance, they creep, they

fly, they swim in every sea” (1981, 199). Gauthier insists on the radical potential of that which has been coded as pejoratively other in androcentric and anthropocentric culture: the insane over the sane, the uncivilized over the civilized, and the diffuse and chaotic over the straight and instrumental.

In the four decades since Gauthier and Cixous were writing, a similar transvaluative strategy has emerged as foundational to the work of ecofeminists who seek to recuperate the identification of women and the natural world as a means of resistance to the ideology of male dominance that produces it. If witches and lunatics are recoverable types, wild women celebrated for the threat they represent to patriarchal society, then so too is the animal—an abject body whose objectification and violation is the source of the power wielded by the similes and symbols used to insult women: nag, bat, cow, bitch. Modern retellings of the story of women’s relationship with nature in ecofeminism and women’s nature writing break tradition with feminists from Wollstonecraft to Simone de Beauvoir; rather than rejecting the posited connection between women and nature or working to recover masculine transcendence for women, they emphasize the cognate oppressions of women and all other natural entities.<sup>1</sup> In turn, over the last twenty or so years, critical animal studies scholars have theorized a creaturely ethic that embroils human bodies with other living bodies, foregrounding their shared “status of being a creature, subject to the requirements of the surrounding environment, the vicissitudes of time, and the vulnerabilities of the body” (Herman 2016, 3). This scholarship also proposes the ethical and political possibilities that arise from the acknowledgment of “modes of affiliation and connectedness across species lines” (4).

To the extent that work in ecofeminism and critical animal studies follows a recuperative logic comparable to (and perhaps partially derived from) that which defines radical feminist attempts to reconstruct female otherness as an empowering force, these fields of enquiry can be seen to carry some of the same dangers. As scholars since the 1970s have

pointed out, the theory of female madness as a form of feminist protest risked reproducing the patriarchal correlation of femininity with deviance and insanity. Likewise, recent efforts to recognize and establish cross-species affiliations are invested in a negative epistemology of vulnerability and susceptibility that, in relation to women's experience, cannot help but extend the valences of the feminine as deficiency and passivity. Does a woman's (re)turn to nature offer a meaningful route for defying the natural order of masculinist and anthropocentric society? Does evacuating the city mean resisting or recapitulating its law, discovering a utopic space of alterity and otherness or only throwing yourself, with the sphinx, off a cliff? Or, to adopt a concept from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari that has been central, if contested, within ecofeminism and critical animal studies, what are the subjective realities of becoming-animal, particularly for women? As Roman Bartosch notes in his new reading of Julia Leigh's *The Hunter* (1999), discussions of the generative potential of Deleuze and Guattari's becoming-animal often ignore the fact that "those who cross the species boundary do that at their own peril" (2016, 261). For Bartosch, as Leigh's novel imbues the event of becoming-animal "with a sense of fragility and undecidability," it raises the question, "what good does it do to 'become-animal' if the result is extinction?" (265).

The issues around a feminist resistance predicated in a negative epistemology of non-human alterity structure two provocative new works of fiction by women writers: *The Vegetarian*, a 2007 Korean-language novel by Han Kang that was translated into English by Deborah Smith in 2015, and *The Natural Way of Things*, a novel by the Australian author Charlotte Wood also published in 2015. Apart from one essay examining *The Vegetarian* in the context of posthumanism (Stobie 2018), neither work has yet received sustained scholarly analysis. Kang's book won a global readership in translation following its award of the 2016 Man Booker International Prize; Wood's was a critical and commercial success primarily within the Australian market, though it was also released in the United States and the United

Kingdom in 2016. In spite of their different cultural contexts, the novels' scenarios are, in their simplest forms, strikingly coincident: in *The Vegetarian*, a woman wants to become a tree; in *The Natural Way of Things*, a woman wants to become a rabbit. The degree to which either woman desires her own metamorphosis is a function of the terrifically curtailed range of choices available to them in a violently misogynistic society. Nevertheless, Kang and Wood's impossible communions with nature radicalize the cultural intimacy between women and nature in exploring how the natural world might serve as a refuge from the city, the realm of the proper.

To interpret Kang and Wood's writing in these terms is to apply the language and metaphors of early French feminism, now half a century old, to contemporary global fiction.<sup>2</sup> This counterintuitive move suggests the enduring relevance of this theory to Western feminist thought in the twenty-first century, which is, as I argue, marked by a retrospection of some of the debates that developed in second wave feminism. I read *The Vegetarian* and *The Natural Way of Things* as crucial sites for reevaluating the legacies of radical feminist theory and women's nature writing in the late twentieth century, as well as more recent work in critical animal studies that asserts the positive potential of radical affiliations between humans and nature. Kang and Wood's depictions of the natural woman equivocate between the utopian impulses of this figure and her carceral, imprisoning, hazards. In both novels, the hostility of the city to both women and nature does not merely create the conditions of the women's retreat to nature, which is also their abrogation of the human, the symbolic and, in some ways, the literal. It also charts the natural as a deadly terminus for those who move to enter it. The two texts search for what trees and rabbits can offer to the women whose otherness and victimization they share, particularly in the alienation of trees and rabbits from culture and their indifference to human language. But as the novels' denouements track together as dramas of

human communication and noncommunication, Kang and Wood reestablish the primacy of women's relationships with other women over their being-with, or as, nature.

Thus *The Vegetarian* and *The Natural Way of Things* ultimately refuse metaphorical and sentimentalized conceptions of the woman who—in an exalted “sweeping-away” or “undoing” of her identity (Baker 2002, 68)—is seen to become-animal, or become-natural. Like Leigh's *The Hunter*, these novels test the limits of contemporary work in critical animal studies. More surprisingly, they return us to earlier moments in Western intellectual and literary history, when the conditions of vulnerability, silence, and alterity were reassessed in relation to the topos of female madness in radical feminism and the identification of women with the natural world in feminist nature writing. As the watch-bitch, pushed to the edge of the city, turns her back on it and runs, these new novels recognize how the city's violence against women is imbricated with its violence against nonhuman life forms. Yet they also warn of the risks of the natural woman, a romanticized figure whose absence and silence replicates the gendered norms it is seen to revolutionize—and severs the human relationships that might, one day, unmake the city.

### **Resisting and reproducing the natural order**

A group of ten young women are abducted and imprisoned at an abandoned sheep farm in the remote Australian bush. Each of the women has been involved in a sexual scandal and assembled by the tabloid media into a crude, compound type of the slatternly woman. Made famous as “the minister's-little-travel-tramp,” “the yuck-ugly-dog from the cruise ship,” and the “bogan-gold-digger-gangbang slut,” the women are, the narrator of *The Natural Way of Things* tells us, “what happens when you don't keep your fucking slag's mouth shut” (Wood 2015, 47). As the women are punished for speaking up, their public castigation prefigures their removal from society at the bidding of the powerful men who are implicated in their testimonies

of abuse and rape. The narrator makes this clear near the novel's midpoint, after the women have endured many months in captivity: "What would people in their old lives be saying about these girls?... 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.... [T]hey marshalled themselves into this prison where they had made their beds, and now, once more, were lying in them" (176). A woman here is one who has things done to her, the past-tense, passive-voice construction of "a girl was attacked, a woman was raped" expressing the docility that Rousseau imagined was central to natural womanhood. Yet, in eliding male aggression, the silences opened up by the passive voice are filled with a complicit, culpable femaleness. In the natural way of things, woman is positioned as victim and aggressor, prey and predator.

Wood's inspiration for the outback prison in *The Natural Way of Things* was the Hay Institute for Girls, a detention center in New South Wales where young women were incarcerated in the 1960s and 1970s. "[Q]uite often, the girls in those homes had been assaulted or sexually molested in some way, and they told somebody about it," Wood said in a 2016 interview. "So the response was not to punish the perpetrator...but to punish them and lock them up" (Wallace 2016). Less directly, Wood's repurposed sheep farm references the confinement of Indigenous Australians in a system of reserves and other institutions from the nineteenth century until the 1960s, and, since 2007, through the Northern Territory "Intervention," a policy which has allowed the Australian government to apply a series of controls to Aboriginal people living in specific areas of the Territory. In Wood's novel, the violence of patriarchal and imperial Australia is connected to, and condensed in, the brutal industry for which the farmland was originally allocated—by, presumably, white colonial invaders. Labelled dogs in social and news media, the women are led around on leashes and

made to sleep in kennels. Just as the metaphor of “butchering” absorbed in discourses of sexual violence derives its force from the “originating oppression of animals” it transmutes (Adams 1990, 43), the grounds for the women’s internment is the humiliation, objectification, and destruction of animals.

*The Vegetarian* also uses the language of the natural to describe the vast entanglement of androcentrism and anthropocentrism in a different neo-colonial context. Early in the novel, Mr. Cheong drags his wife Yeong-hye out to dinner with his bosses, where Yeong-hye’s unwillingness to eat anything but salad and kimchi provokes the reprobation of the party. As one of the bosses’ wives says, “Meat-eating is a fundamental human instinct, which means vegetarianism goes against human nature, right? It just isn’t natural” (Kang 2015, 23). Yeong-hye’s diet is a response to her recurring nightmares, which cast meat eating as a murderous act. She is first woken by this dream a couple of months before the dinner party. Her husband discovers her in the early hours of the morning, standing at the open refrigerator. Her body is “so unnaturally still it was almost as if she were some kind of ghost, silently standing its ground” (7). The next day, he is shocked by her “unnaturally serene face” and “firm voice” as she empties the fridge of meat, eggs, and milk, and neglects to iron his shirt or see him off to work (11).

Yeong-hye’s unnatural refusal to eat meat is caught up with her unnatural refusal to submit to her husband’s “carefully ordered existence,” an existence which traces the patriarchal injunctions of post-“Liberation” Korea (4). The disparagement of Yeong-hye’s vegetarianism by the dinner guests is linked to the policing of social obligations around both food and female propriety in polite Korean society. When the couple sits down at the restaurant, Cheong realizes that his wife is not wearing a bra under her blouse. Shamed by the scandalized looks of the other women, he decides to “act natural and pretend that there was nothing untoward” (22). In spite of this acknowledgment of the contingency of the natural, its status as a social rite that

can be faked, Cheong still returns to its norms on the car ride home in justifying his rage toward his wife: “Naturally, I got angry” (26). Soon after, Cheong returns home inebriated and rapes Yeong-hye, and his brutality is framed as part of the legacy of Japanese colonialism (and, less explicitly, the domination of the United States after the instalment of its military apparatus in South Korea at the end of the Second World War). Yeong-hye, Cheong tells us, “lay there in the dark staring up at the ceiling, her face blank, as though she were a ‘comfort woman’ dragged in against her will” (30). Likened to, treated like, a comfort woman, a military sex slave drafted during the Pacific War by Imperial Japan, Yeong-hye subsequently suffers a mental breakdown and is admitted to psychiatric care. And then her husband abandons her; as Yeong-hye’s brother-in-law realizes, it seems to Cheong “perfectly natural to discard his wife as though she were a broken watch or household appliance” (70).

The voice of the natural in *The Natural Way of Things* and *The Vegetarian* echoes the voice of patriarchy—suffocating, interminable—that narrates the long opening sections of Susan Griffin’s classic work of feminist nature writing, *Women and Nature*. The figure of patriarchy in Griffin’s book is known as the Lecturer, and he gives the woman a litany of “given names” that the labelling of Wood’s outcast women recalls: “harlot, heifer, mare...quail, slattern and Lady Macbeth” (Griffin 1984, 148, 99). Directing the woman’s gaze upwards, the Lecturer silences her attempts to “make anything different” out of herself or the skies spread above them by quantifying the “regular movements” of women and “heavenly bodies” alike (148). He takes their measurements, moral or mathematic. But Griffin’s book turns on an act of rebellion: “[S]he drew herself up like a man, how silly she looked, dressed as she was, smaller than he, how out of place in that defiance. What was there to defy anyway? Just the natural order of things” (149). The man’s shock at her play at power, like Cheong’s astonishment at Yeong-hye’s insubordination in *The Vegetarian*, cedes to doubt, wedging “an unnatural space between his soul and his flesh.” This unnatural space disrupts the hierarchical

relation of teacher and pupil. “Suppose that gesture of hers meant...there is no difference between them except the power he wields over her,” he thinks (150).

Griffin’s *Women and Nature* shaped the mythic contours of a vast body of Western feminist poetry and prose in the late twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> Particularly influential was the redemptive arc of the book, whereby the disordering of the natural order leads directly to the woman’s incorporation into nature’s endless metamorphoses: “[M]y shape changes daily. I was sand. I was mountain. I was stone, I was water. I was shellfish and sea anemone and sea snail” (Griffin 1984, 160). Ultimately, the woman experiences a transcendent, erotic union with nature: “I am in you, I am filled with light inside you...the light has extinguished my skin” (227).

*The Natural Way of Things* and *The Vegetarian* follow this same movement from the natural order to the realm of nature, but these contemporary fictions also broach the more troubling connotations of Griffin’s repurposing of the association of women and nature. These connotations are latent in Griffin’s depiction of nature’s “extinguishing” light and of metamorphosis as a process of rejuvenation and obliteration, as the woman becomes “a seed...in the soil which becomes rich with every death” (167). In *The Vegetarian*, as Yeong-hye’s nightmares turn into a ravaging insomnia, she eats less and less, and in a matter of months her body resembles “the skeletal frame of an invalid” (Kang 2015, 18). Late in the novel, when she is diagnosed with schizophrenia and anorexia nervosa, her male doctor apportion blame in suggesting that “a power struggle with a domineering mother” might be one of the “psychological factors” behind her illness (141). But the novel clearly locates its origins in male aggressions, and specifically Cheong’s daily acts of violence, which repeat the harsh treatment of Yeong-hye as a child at the hands of her father, a “patriarchal” ex-military man who “whipped her over the calves until she was eighteen years old” (29). “The morning before I had the dream,” reads a section of narration in Yeong-hye’s voice and addressed to her

husband, “I was mincing frozen meat—remember? You got angry.” Cheong screams at her when he comes into the kitchen and finds her “squeamish” as she prepares the meat. Yeong-hye accidentally slices through her finger with the knife—but, as she sucks the blood, she is “strangely pacified” by its taste: “I gazed vacantly at your distorted face as you raged.... Why didn’t this agitate me like it should have done? Instead, I became even calmer.... Suddenly, everything around me began to slide away, as though pulled back on an ebbing tide.... I was alone, the only thing remaining in all of infinite space” (19).

Yeong-hye’s vacant stare is presented as a tactic of withdrawal from South Korean society that finds its resources in its patriarchal norms. In childhood Yeong-hye was, as her sister tells us, “docile and naïve,” unable to deflect or resist her father’s beatings: “Instead, she had merely absorbed all her suffering inside her” (157). Yeong-hye is scripted into submission, silence, and invisibility by the Confucian “Three Rules of Obedience” (*samjong chido*) and “Seven Vices” (*ch’ilgō chiak*), teachings that are reformulated within the anti-colonial nationalism of late twentieth and early twenty-first-century Korean society.<sup>4</sup> Even as, in the West, stereotypes of Korean women as compliant and reserved abbreviate the construction of the Orient as a feminized, primitive Other, in Korea, these stereotypes support the neo-Confucian principle of *pubu yubōl*, which designates essential differences between husbands and wives. This principle underwrites the patrilineal family as the foundation of the nation as a “community of men and defended by men, in which women exist merely as a precondition,” as “domestic reproducers of heirs and potential warriors” (Moon 1998, 52, 54).

These discourses surface in *The Vegetarian*, when Cheong reassures himself over his wife’s silence on their way to the work dinner. “There’s nothing wrong with keeping quiet,” he thinks; “after all, hadn’t women traditionally been expected to be demure and restrained?” (Kang 2015, 21). Yet a couple of months earlier, in the kitchen at home, Yeong-hye corrals female reticence and passivity as mechanisms of detachment from her society’s gendered codes

and rituals. As the world flows back as an oceanic tide, she finds herself quarantined, alone, in a dry land—and released to the untrammelled terrain of “all of infinite space” (19). Across the novel, this vision of escape from the proper turns into a vision of “undulating forests” that “envelop [Yeong-hye’s] exhausted body and lift her up” as “cities, small towns and roads are...swept away” (169).

Even though Yeong-hye’s refusal to eat animals suggests her challenge to the law of the city, it still entails a bodily self-harm that replicates the abuses of her husband and her father, as well as of her society toward animals. Much as she once “absorbed” her grief into her young body, her starvation reflects a pacifist stance that redirects the violence of carnivorous consumption by turning it inward. Hence the victims of her nightmares are both animals and women: “Dreams of my hands around someone’s throat...grabbing the swinging ends of their long hair and hacking it all off, sticking my finger into their slippery eyeball” (32). Yeong-hye’s body becomes a site of violence, an assemblage of “weapons,” hands, feet, teeth—all except her breasts, which, she reasons, cannot kill: “With my round breasts, I’m okay.... So why do they keep on shrinking? ... Why are my edges all sharpening—what am I going to gouge?” (33). What her body is gouging is her own body. As her breasts shrink, and her form is reorganized away from the functions of maternal reproduction and nourishment her society idealizes, her physical transformation also redoubles the violence of the men in her family. At her parents’ house, when her father, husband, and brother-in-law try to force-feed her a piece of pork, she spits it out, picks up a knife, and slashes open her wrist. To her brother-in-law, she looks like a “cornered animal,” but she then attacks her own body, “hack[ing] at it like it was a piece of meat”—mimicking the action of her father, whose “fat palm,” moments before, “cleave[s] the empty space” between them to slap her face (66, 67, 38). As with the operations of the passive voice in the scene of female abuse in *The Natural Way of Things*, Yeong-hye assumes the roles of prey and predator. “They say my insides have all atrophied,”

Yeong-hye tells her sister toward the novel's end. "I'm not an animal any more.... I don't need to eat, not now.... All I need is sunlight" (153–54). Made in the image of a tree, Yeong-hye's starved form is the consequence of an act of radical negation that sets the female body at odds with itself.

In *The Natural Way of Things* as in *The Vegetarian*, female defiance of gendered violence involves a subversive turn to nature that works simultaneously to resist and reproduce patriarchal aggressions. However, the difference between the polite urban environment of Kang's South Korea and the wild, dangerous bushland of Wood's Australia is marked by the divergence between their female characters' attitudes toward and relationships with animals. Whereas Yeong-hye renounces both violence toward animals and her corporeal connection to them ("I'm not an animal any more"), Yolanda Kovacs, the central figure in *The Natural Way of Things*, does neither; to the contrary, she becomes a hunter of animals and reaches for a deeper form of embodied intimacy with the creatures she kills and eats.

Yolanda has a body that is to men a "marvellous thing" but that is to her a mystery and a curse, a fleshy costume subject to the intrusion and possession of others: "The body was separate from her, it was a thing she wore. The things that were done to it had nothing to do with her, Yolanda, at all" (Wood 2015, 51–52). The "things" that are done to the "thing" of Yolanda's body are her gang rape by a team of footballers in a hotel room, and the blame laid at Yolanda's feet for the violence wrought against her is augmented by her own alienation from her body. The night she is attacked, she views her body as "a rubbish tip" in which the men "emptied themselves," while she, much like Yeong-hye, "float[s] out from herself, and away" (223, 52). But after the managers of the football team pay for Yolanda to be interned at the sheep farm, her treatment as an animal—led around on a leash, made to sleep in a kennel—forces her to return to "her dumb dog's body" (92). When Yolanda and the other women menstruate, Boncer and Teddy, the two young men who have been employed to guard them,

mock them as “pigs, shark bait, raw steak,” replaying long-held fears of menstrual blood and female fecundity (120–21). The experience reminds Yolanda of a video she once saw of an elephant giving birth, its “alien, monstrous, female” placenta revealing the rationale for her captivity: “It was why they were here...the hatred of what came out of you, what you contained.... [S]he shared it, this dull fear and hatred of her body. It had bloomed inside her all her life, purged but regrowing, unstoppable, every month: this dark weed and the understanding that she was meat, was born to make meat” (122).

As we’ve seen, Kang’s Yeong-hye commits to expelling meat from her body, to turning flesh and blood into vegetation—which is also, in the context of the Korean insistence on women as reproductive and domestic beings, to seek to grow plants instead of children. In the psychiatric hospital late in the novel, she tells her sister, In-Hye, about one of her dreams: “I was standing on my head ... leaves were growing from my body, and roots were sprouting from my hands.... I wanted flowers to bloom from my crotch so I spread my legs” (Kang 2015, 148). By contrast, Wood’s Yolanda learns that she cannot purge herself of meat because she is meat; she discovers a new relation to her body by accepting her animality, by coming to terms with menstrual blood as an “unstoppable,” un-purgeable, flow. This discovery, and the dwindling of the prison’s food supplies, leads Yolanda to begin hunting wild rabbits. Alluding again to the Indigenous culture and way of life that was violently disrupted by European colonization of Australia, Wood casts Yolanda in the mold of the traditional hunter-gatherer, a figure that, when viewed outside the orbit of Western anthropocentrism, is seen to exist in a nonviolent relation of mutuality with animals. As Tim Ingold argues, “a hunt that is successfully consummated with a kill” might be understood as evidence of an amicable relationship between hunter and animal, inasmuch as the animal can be said to have allowed itself to be drawn into the hunters’ “familiar ambit of social being” (2000, 69). In this sense,

Yolanda's ensconcing in the "kingdom of rabbits" involves a totemic identification with the rabbit in which the categories of human and animal intermingle (Wood 2015, 194).

Still, in spite of Yolanda's felt kinship with the rabbits, Wood's novel grapples with how Yolanda's hunting, which gives her power over the vicious, quick-fisted Boncer, effectively displaces his violence onto the animals. Yolanda dreams of "herself with claws, digging a burrow. Tunnelling out under the fence.... Not returning to her old life ... but inwards, downwards, running on all fours" (Wood 2015, 237). If she is becoming one of Cixous's women "'in flight' ...go[ing] forward by leaps in search of themselves" (1981, 52), it is as she moves "inwards, downwards," away from the "old life" of the city and its hierarchies of power. But Yolanda's place among the rabbits is sanctioned by their deaths—and so she stands, tall and imposing, before the rabbits' corpses in the scullery, with a "royal bearing" that is only heightened by the costume of gizzard-glued rabbit skins she chooses to wear: "Silhouetted against the sky, she is a warrior creature in furs, stinking of rabbit piss and death, muscled like a man" (202, 259).

Yolanda may recognize her commonality with many-specied mothers from elephants to rabbits, but she is united with the animals only when she adopts a "muscled" male pose and its effects of domination. Swathed in rabbit fur, a burlesque of the fashionable fur coat, Yolanda figures her own historical, pejorative alignment with animals. She is, as Andrée Collard writes of the woman in fur, "the prey being brought down. She and the fur animal—one 'alive' and the other dead—are one and the same.... Even when man does not actually hunt animals, his success is still reflected in the kill" (1989, 55). Yet Yolanda's furs carry the stench of animal piss and death, for she is both the woman who wears animals and the shadow of the man who hunts for them. Just as Yeong-hye's tactics of passivity and refusal, learned from the trees, place her in the female role as construed by male culture, Yolanda's communion with the rabbits also follows the rules of male culture and its governing violence.

### **The speechless protest of the madwoman**

In *The Vegetarian* and *The Natural Way of Things*, the masculinist order of contemporary life circumscribes even the modes of resistance to it. This circumscription extends from the establishment of radical attachments between women and nature to the reclamation of madness as a form of “wild” feminist protest—that is, in Gauthier’s terms, the “wild dances” of the “lunar, lunatic” woman, who expresses herself through a “silence [that] can be heard,” a language beyond the masculine *logos* (1981, 199). Today, the lunatic and the witch still hold a great deal of currency in feminist thought. Kate Zambreno’s critical memoir *Heroines*, for instance, updates the recovery projects of the early French feminists in seeking to depathologize and radicalize the women she calls the “mad wives of modernism,” including Vivien(ne) Eliot, Zelda Fitzgerald, and Virginia Woolf. These women were, Zambreno says, “[l]ocked away, rendered safe. Forgotten, erased, or rewritten” in their lives and in our histories of modernism (2012, 8). Part of what is fascinating and troubling about Zambreno’s memoir is how she takes possession of, even feels herself possessed by, these so-called mad wives: “I begin to cannibalize these women, literally incorporating them, their traumas” (49). In problematizing the gendered diagnostic that labels women mad, *Heroines* runs perilously close to romanticizing mental illness.

Early feminists were well aware of these dangers. In her pioneering study of the madwoman, for instance, Phyllis Chesler casts her plight as “a doomed search for potency,” but she admits that this line of thought risks ignoring the lived realities of the mentally ill (1974, 31). Shoshana Felman puts it more pointedly: “Depressed and terrified women are not about to seize the means of production and reproduction: quite the opposite of rebellion, madness is the impasse confronting those whom cultural condition has deprived of the very means of protest or self-affirmation” (1975, 2).

Even so, the recovery of the madwoman from the 1970s on laid the groundwork for the debates around the corporeal politics of anorexia in the late 1980s and 1990s, when Elizabeth Grosz and others reimagined the anorectic woman as a “volatile body” capable of resisting the constraints of patriarchal models of femininity and the practices of capitalist consumption (Grosz 1994).<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the recovery of first the madwoman and then the anorexic woman as figures of feminist protest was anticipated by an important 1969 novel by Margaret Atwood, which subsequently became a site for working through the political implications of the corporeal turn in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In *The Edible Woman*, the deepening anxiety of Marian MacAlpine is expressed in her paranoid response to her fiancé, Peter Wollander, as he boasts about killing rabbits. Soon, Marian’s body begins to “simply [refuse] to eat anything that had once been, or...might still be living” (Atwood [1969] 1998, 193). Whereas Marian narrates the novel’s first part, its second part is narrated in the third person; this transition marks “Marian’s refusal to speak in the first person and her body’s refusal to consume living things” (Hobgood 2002, 152). For Jennifer Hobgood, these refusals “carve out a space that is productive and creative in its ability to critique the structures that it slips beyond” (2002, 152). In this view, Marian becomes a volatile body, emancipated from capitalist and patriarchal society into the space of schizophrenia, in the sense described by Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus*. She enters a state of “being otherwise” and of “becoming,” a loss of ego that is conceived in terms of “a local, molecular politics rather than a disabling illness” (Hobgood 2002, 158).

Clearly, *The Edible Woman* is an indispensable precursor to *The Vegetarian*, with Marian’s decomposition foreshadowing that of Yeong-hye—although the ambiguous final scene of Atwood’s novel does seem to offer a greater symbolic agency to Marian than that afforded to Yeong-hye in *The Vegetarian*. *The Edible Woman* ends with Marian’s re-entry to her society, as she bakes, serves, and eats a cake in the shape of a woman. Scholars debate the

meaning of Marian's cake, but it is certainly possible to interpret it as a gesture of resistance to the patriarchal society that threatens to devour her. The ending of *The Vegetarian* is much bleaker by comparison, as Yeong-hye's wasted body is hurried away in an ambulance. This difference between the novels reflects the shifting conversation about the political (in)efficacy of female madness over the last fifty years. Although the madwoman remains a paradigmatic figure for female rebellion, feminist work on mental illness and eating disorders since the early 2000s has sought to pull together dichotomized treatments of the illness by examining it as both emancipatory and oppressive—as in Paula Saukko's *The Anorexic Self* (2008)—or has focused attention on the lived experience of the suffering woman, which has arguably been erased by theories of the madwoman's social construction and metaphorical potential.<sup>6</sup>

Like *The Edible Woman*, both *The Vegetarian* and *The Natural Way of Things* approach female madness as a politically coherent disengagement from the laws of the proper; but they also manifest a deep ambivalence about this disengagement from human society, bearing out the dialectic relation of emancipation and oppression theorized by Saukko and others. To the degree that Yeong-hye and Yolanda are depicted as madwomen, their condition is patterned after a vegetal or animal alterity defined in terms of the refusal of specific, human forms of language. This alterity serves, as Marian Scholtmeijer argues in relation to other fictions of animal and human relationships by women, as “an ideational model for ontological defiance” that “empower[s] the state of being ‘other,’ which dominant ideology objectifies as a state of weakness” (1995, 232). For Kang and Wood's natural women, to become a tree or a rabbit is to stop speaking, and hence to resist—in limited and fateful ways—the visual and verbal systems of signification that prop up androcentric and anthropocentric power.

In the hospital in *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-hye's taciturnity swells into incomprehensibility, as she squats in a sunny corner of the ward and “mutters incessantly to herself” (138). “Soon now, words and thoughts will all disappear,” she promises In-hye in the

days before she stops speaking altogether (154). Yeong-hye's retreat into silence is staged in connection to her symbolic possession as an image within the visual order of contemporary Korea. As new work in psychology, sociology, and media studies has shown, the rapid economic gains of South Korea in the last four decades—alongside the expansion of women's rights through gains in the formal political sphere during this period—has been accompanied by marked increases in body dissatisfaction and eating disorders among women. According to recent studies, young South Korean women experience greater body dissatisfaction than their U.S. counterparts, and may also be subject to proportionately higher levels of unrealistic standards for appearance than other Asian ethnic groups.<sup>7</sup> And, even as Korean beauty culture is exported to the world through the country's booming cosmetics industry, the majority of images of women in Korean fashion and beauty magazines portray women as “decorative objects” (Jung and Lee 2009, 284).

Kang references this image culture in *The Vegetarian* via the cosmetics store owned by In-hye, and it forms the backdrop to the second of the novel's three parts, which focuses on Yeong-hye's brother-in-law, a video artist who remains nameless throughout the novel. When the brother-in-law learns that Yeong-hye still has on her buttocks a Mongolian mark, a pigmentation spot that usually disappears by puberty, the thought of the blue spot generates in his mind “the image of a blue flower on a woman's buttocks,” which becomes “the image of men and women having sex, their naked bodies completely covered with painted flowers” (Kang 2015, 59). The man becomes consumed with the effort to turn these images into reality, eventually filming himself and Yeong-hye in this arrangement. The sign of the Mongolian mark is nubilous, but its association with childhood and its visual likeness to a bruise is highly poignant in the context of the abuses of Yeong-hye's father, husband, and brother-in-law. Above all, the mark refers to the female body as graphic terrain, marked and infinitely markable. Hence Yeong-hye's brother-in-law views Yeong-hye and In-hye as substitutable

images: in the novel's second marital rape scene, the brother-in-law gags In-hye with his hand "so he wouldn't have to hear that nasal voice" and thrusts himself "toward the image of *her*," of Yeong-hye (81). The man seeks the image of Yeong-hye's body entwined with his own, an image to be "forbidden either to end or to come to a climax" (114). Caught in her brother-in-law's sights, and in the eerie temporality of cinematographic exposure, Yeong-hye is a figure at the precipice of being, a mute symbol of absence, whose "long silences" are dubiously taken by her brother-in-law to "signif[y] consent" (98).

Yeong-hye's anorectic vanishing act is an attempt not only to "shuck off the human" but also to sink her body into the vegetal, to veil herself in the flowers painted on her by her brother-in-law (179). Lying naked before him at his studio, "utterly without resistance," Yeong-hye paradoxically seems "armoured by the power of her own renunciation," by the whittled-down silhouette of her emaciated body (87). Then, when she sits with "shoulders hunched like a baby chick trying to get warm" during a break from painting, her posture makes her look "uncommonly hard and self-contained, so much so that anyone watching would feel uneasy, and want to look away" (86). Taut, somehow unassailable, her surfaces are the canvas for her brother-in-law's predacious sexual fantasies and a kind of shield or protective cladding that rebuffs his objectifying gaze.

Yeong-hye's silence, then, repurposes her brother-in-law's visual designs on and for her body. In *The Natural Way of Things*, on the other hand, the silence that shades Yolanda's transformation into a hunter and an animal constitutes her evacuation of a masculinist signifying system that expropriates all words, souring them in contempt and cruelty. As Yolanda lies "formless and wordless" in the hotel room, the men "whispered things to her while they used her body.... [S]ome called her dreadful things, but worst were the ones who used sweet words, horrible sugary epithets" (223, 222). Yolanda's growing silence in the winter of her imprisonment protracts this traumatic event. In the fall, she etches out a companionable

quiet with her friend, Verla, as they labor over the dead rabbits “like slippery new babies, flipping and turning the creatures as casually as the folding of pillowslips”—a travesty of women’s domestic work (170). But as the seasons turn, Yolanda stops speaking altogether, and Verla is grieved to realize that their friendship models the “bodily, speechless” bond of “a man and his dog” (257).

Nevertheless, from the novel’s opening pages, Wood sketches the lines of flight along which Yolanda will depart the language systems of the city—first by necessity, then by design. “So there were kookaburras here,” the novel begins, as the birds waken Yolanda on the first morning at the farm: “Later there will be other birds; sometimes she would ask about them, but questions made people suspicious and they wouldn’t answer her. She would begin to make up her own names for the birds. The waterfall birds, whose calls fell tumbling. And the squeakers, the tiny darting grey ones” (3–4). That first morning, the kookaburras’ call is to Yolanda “loud and lunatic” (3). But her descriptions of the creatures, renaming them for their sounds, colors, and movements, are a creative intervention in the classification of the natural world, a perturbation of the codes of language that have long helped to maintain the distinctions between man and nature, and man and woman—like the Lecturer’s measurements in Griffin’s *Women and Nature*. Yolanda’s alternative taxonomy of the birds forecasts her eventual embrace of nature in its lunacy. “Some of the girls said Yolanda had gone crazed, but she knew she was sane, and getting saner,” we read later on. Moving “beyond her named self, beyond *girl*, or *female*. Beyond human,” Yolanda’s speechless exile among the rabbits critiques the violent illogic of misogyny by inverting the properties of speech and silence, captivity and freedom, and sanity and insanity (193). At the end of the novel, the other women are bundled into a bus by Perry, the man sent to retrieve them by the company that was paid to imprison them. The women pity “poor insane Yolanda” who remains behind, “playing dirty animals. Still captive.... Mad as shit” (305). But it is not Yolanda who is really captive: Verla catches sight

of her sprinting next to the bus as it leaves the farm, “spinning low and fast as a rabbit” (308). And it is not Yolanda who is really mad: Perry’s endearing terms for the women—“sweetie,” “love”—are stripped to reveal the malice at their base when he tells Verla, after she demands to be let off the bus, “die then, mental bitch” (307, 312).

Die then, he spits, as Verla joins Yolanda in the unforgiving wildness and shelterless solitude of desert and bush. Is this the fate of all mental bitches, human or sphinx? Yolanda’s longing to merge with rabbit and earth is, she realizes, a “murderous” one, a “temptation to sink and sleep” that “must be resisted,” else she end up like “people who died in snow” (275). As In-hye knows, too, the forest that fills Yeong-hye’s hallucinations offers only a “merciless” and “frighteningly chill form of life” (Kang 2015, 169). Although both Kang and Wood accommodate the state of being other as a form of ontological defiance, their novels register unease with the prospect of the woman’s full surrender to the natural. Whatever the radical potential of the mad or anorectic woman, her body is an ill one, boding death.

### **Silence breakers and the return to the city**

Seeking to resist their oppression by emulating its logic, Yeong-hye and Yolanda stutter into a silence that tallies with the city’s injunctions for women to “[keep] quiet” in Kang’s novel and to “keep your fucking slag’s mouth shut” in Wood’s (Kang 2015, 21; Wood 2015, 47). Silence, Rebecca Solnit writes, “is what allows people to suffer without recourse.... If our voices are essential aspects of our humanity, to be rendered voiceless is to be dehumanized or excluded from one’s humanity. And the history of silence is central to women’s history.” For Solnit, “silence separates, leaves us bereft of the help or solidarity or just communion that speech can solicit or elicit” (2017, 18). Solnit’s essay on silence appeared in the first months of 2017, published in excerpted form online and in the essay collection *The Mother of All Questions*. Her return to the topic via the earlier work of Tillie Olsen and other second wave feminists

seemed uncannily prescient at the year's end, by which time it made sense for *Time Magazine* to explode the category of its Person of the Year by conferring the title to the “silence breakers,” the mass of women and men who had spoken up about their experiences of gendered and sexualized violence as part of the global movement constellated around the hashtag #metoo.

In this cultural moment, it is harder to see how animal or vegetal alterity can offer to women a model of defiance and empowerment. Misgivings about what it might mean in real terms to embrace those states of weakness that are objectified under patriarchy are connected, at intervals, with earlier objections to feminists' identification with the female hysteric who communicates her anger and desire through a convulsive mode of speech. If the work of second wave feminists to cast light on the eclipsed history of women's writing and creative labor, a history that was “dark with silences,” in Olsen's terms, resonates in new ways for feminists today, so too do the dissenting voices of those feminists who were alarmed at theories of *l'écriture féminine* that denied “discursiveness [as] an integral part of feminine discourse” (Olsen 1980, 6; Clément 1981, 135). Catherine Clément, for example, decried the performance of hysteria as a form of revolt that “is played out along with the historical fetters that enclose it on all sides” and that “does not produce any change: it signals and repeats” (133, 135).

Change, Clément insisted, comes not from the obtuse witness of a “silence [that] can be heard” (Gauthier 1981, 199), but from enjoining intellectual activity with mass political struggle, especially through female solidarity across class lines. In step with the current public discourse around gendered harassment and violence, which includes a retrospection of second-wave debates over female madness and silence, *The Vegetarian* and *The Natural Way of Things* emphasize the violent keeping of female silence under patriarchy and the necessity of its unkeeping, its breaking, through the opening of lines of communication and care between women whom patriarchy has estranged. Wood's novel, especially, makes clear women's complicity in the culture that enslaves them, from the “voices of girls everywhere snorting into

their vodkas” as the public scandals break around the ten young women, to Yolanda’s first assessment of Verla as a “dumb bitch” and Verla’s own haughty, classist disdain toward her fellow captives (Wood 2015, 70, 14). Moreover, Yolanda and Verla’s abductions are aided and abetted by women: the female “gender advisor” for the football club whose members raped Yolanda (Yolanda’s *I refuse* modulates into a real speech act, a “flowering” in and of Verla’s mouth: “Let me off,” she tells Perry (Wood 2015, 311). Finally, it produces a real act of female solidarity, as the other women on the bus force Perry to comply with Verla’s demand. The women organize themselves into “a wall of girls” “made strong by labour and brutality,” “lit brilliant by the lowering sun” in Perry’s rear-view window (312, 311).

The last part of *The Vegetarian* focuses the empathic female perspective of In-hye. As Yeong-hye vaults social bounds to which In-hye remains confined, “soaring alone over a boundary she herself could never bring herself to cross,” In-hye’s feelings of betrayal are knotted into her guilt over her failure to intervene in her father’s mistreatment of her sister as a child (Kang 2015, 143). Indeed, Yeong-hye’s dream of trees is specifically a dream of a new family: as she tells In-hye, “all the trees of the world are like brothers and sisters” (144). In the ambulance at the novel’s conclusion, In-hye’s desire to understand her sister yields a desperate attempt at communication: “[S]he brings her mouth right up to Yeong-hye’s ear.... ‘I have dreams too, you know’” (182). Like Verla’s dreams of animals, which are darker versions of Yolanda’s, In-hye’s dreams of trees accompany her fears of her body caverned by “an open wound,” “pulling her in” (163). “I could let myself dissolve into them,” In-hye says at her sister’s ear, “but surely the dream isn’t all there is? We have to wake up at some point, don’t we?” (182).

We are not told whether In-hye’s words break through Yeong-hye’s stupor. Out the window In-hye sees a black bird “flying up towards the dark clouds,” shooting up into the “summer sunlight,” a brightness that prevents her from following the bird’s flight—and, it

seems, her sister's flight from the human (182). But when the narration, in its final paragraph, takes in the roadside trees, "green fire undulating like the rippling flanks of a massive animal, wild and savage," it fixes on In-hye's view of the vegetation as a threatening predator: "In-hye stares fiercely at the trees. As if waiting for an answer. As if protesting against something" (183). What In-hye resists and reviles is the trees' silence, their refusal to respond, and with this the novel turns on nature, condemning it—and patriarchal Korean society—for its unspeaking savagery.

"If for us the void, which culture abhors, is irresistible," declared the feminist newspaper *Le quotidien des femmes* in the mid-1970s, "we will jump without a moment's hesitation.... We would rather learn to land than to give up soaring—We will not allow ourselves to be surrounded or subjected, *we are elsewhere*" (cited in Clément 1981, 130). Here is an earlier vision of the woman in flight, leaping into the elsewhere of the feminine, the void beyond culture, the space outside the city—the woman as a bird, soaring, like Yeong-hye, into the unknown. But what, as Clément asked many years ago, is the "real subjective position that corresponds to this discourse" (130)? Clément's question echoes across the history of modern feminism and is rearticulated in *The Vegetarian*. What if the dark clouds that cover Kang's skies are, like the soil that lines Griffin's earth, rich with death? What if the elsewhere sought by women—birds is another kind of cage?

Kang and Wood's natural women figure the limits of a feminist resistance predicated in the watch-bitch's vulnerability, silence, and nonhuman alterity—conditions that structure both the feminist valorization of the madwoman and the subversive affiliations between women and nature conceptualized in ecofeminism, women's nature writing, and, more recently, in critical animal studies. Like the public conversations about contemporary misogyny, *The Vegetarian* and *The Natural Way of Things* reflect a new confidence—which is also an old confidence—in the reparative capacities of women's speech and solidarity in the face of male

brutality. Women's dreams of trees and rabbits in these contemporary novels reveal the vast imbrication of androcentric and anthropocentric violence, but they are, in the end, nightmares from which women must wake—to return to the city, to disorder the order of nature, to sing out in a clear, collective voice.

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<sup>1</sup> As well as the nature writing I cite later on, see Adams and Donovan (1995) and Kemmerer (2011).

<sup>2</sup> Deborah Smith's translation of *The Vegetarian* has been controversial. After the book won the Man Booker International Prize in 2016, Smith was accused of mistranslation, omission, and embellishment, first in the South Korean media, and then in the West, where her translation has been seen to respond to Western tastes for active protagonists and heightened drama (see Yun 2017). There is important work to be done by scholars of Korean literature and of literature in translation to examine the different versions of *The Vegetarian*, especially since Kang and Smith are currently at work on a revised English translation of the book. I am interested, however, in Kang's translated novel as a textual object that has circulated widely within the global market for English-language fiction—and that has, therefore, been read in relation to the tropes and traditions of Western feminist thought. Indeed, given that Smith's translation served to recalibrate the novel for the Western market, it might well be seen to signify in line with these tropes and traditions in quite direct ways.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of a large number of feminist works whose mythology of women and nature connects to Griffin's book, see Lauter (1984, 172–202) and the writings collected in Anderson (1991).

<sup>4</sup> On these teachings, see Deuchler (1992).

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<sup>5</sup> See also Probyn (1987), Bordo (1993), and Bray and Colebrook (1998).

<sup>6</sup> I am thinking of the large and growing body of work on the social contexts of eating disorders, online and off; the return to the body and testimony of the anorexic woman in clinical or ethnographic studies such as Gremillion (2002) and Warin (2010); and the new perspectives of disabilities studies scholars on embodied madness in literature (for example, Donaldson 2002).

<sup>7</sup> See Jung and Forbes (2006).