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Creaturely Shifts: contemporary animal crossings through the alluring trace of the Romantic sublime

Abstract

This paper considers the transformative use of the sublime aesthetic in two contemporary Gothic novels, Angela Carter's *Heroes and Villains* (1969) and Charlotte Wood's *The Natural Way of Things* (2015). My exploration begins with the Romantic sublime, defined here as a mode of perception created through art that is concerned with the awe-inspiring, the frightening and the ineffable. Sublime metamorphosis extends the Romantic sublime alongside the more fragmentary postmodern sublime through posthumanism. Sublime metamorphoses occur in these two speculative novels when their protagonists pause in the moment of sublime arrest in response to nonhuman others. Such moments create new embodied potentialities that may reshape human/nonhuman relations. When Carter's central protagonist Marianne considers her position in moments of terror, she improves her marginalised status. She pushes through the boundaries of her species and the limitations of an injured world of mutation and brutality, evolving, in the end, to Tiger Lady. In Wood's novel, the entrapped Yolanda shifts from prey to predator to a new kind of self-determination that frees her from her human confinement. Yolanda's friend Verla follows with her own radical transmutation. In these novels sublime metamorphosis resists ideas of human exceptionality and troubles typologies that separate humans from other creatures. This approach may be of interest to creative writers concerned with more generative relations with the world's nonhuman creatures. My own creative efforts are learning from such work.

Biographical note

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Sublime metamorphosis

The concept of sublime metamorphosis, considered here through affects ascribed to fictional characters, radically revises the aesthetic of the Romantic sublime, and the aspects of this literary perspective that have evolved into the postmodern sublime. Sublime metamorphosis is activated when protagonists pause in the moment of sublime arrest and, in that moment, create new embodied potentialities that reshape their positions and possibilities. I consider the transformative potential in sublime metamorphosis through a reading of Angela Carter's *Heroes and Villains* (1969) and Charlotte Wood's *The Natural Way of Things* (2015). These two feminist novels question restrictions in existing human/nonhuman animal relations through their characters' metamorphoses.[1]

The sublime, in broad terms, centres around the idea of ineffability. Vijay Mishra, in his work on the Gothic sublime, describes the sublime as 'the unthinkable, the unnameable, and the unspeakable' where 'the rhetorical and the natural' cannot be reduced to each other and are in 'excess of language' (1994: 23). Phillip Shaw's comprehensive survey of the sublime focuses on 'the moment when the ability to apprehend, to know, and to express a thought or sensation is defeated' while, at the same time, 'the mind gets a feeling for that which lies beyond thought and language' (2006: 3). This article, following these approximations, focuses on how literary works might resonate with the Romantic sublime and its awe inspiring, frightening and ineffable affect. I am particularly interested in the moment of pause, or arrest, that occurs in the violent wonder evoked by the sublime.

The Romantic sublime is concerned with the tension between language and feelings in ways that differentiate it from the rhetorical (or discursive) sublime, from which it takes its origins. In *Treatise on the Sublime*, a Grecian tract written somewhere between the first and third centuries, it is argued that the human 'soul is uplifted by the true sublime' of 'elevated language' (Longinus 1889: 55, 57). This interest in powerful evocative writing as a route to the divine was popularised through Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux's (Boileau's) translation of the treatise in 1674. This work greatly influenced Edmund Burke's well-known essay, 'The Beautiful and the Sublime' (1757).

Burke differentiates feminised reflective beauty from a masculinised interventionist sublime and then, rather than reinforcing the idea of an unknowable and necessary God, he describes the imaginative response of the observer. This early Romantic sublime focuses on the vast and the infinite, through undomesticated nonhuman landscapes, such as wild seas, jagged cliffs and thunderous storms. While Burke attributes such moments to a male 'Deity', most notable for 'his' terrible 'power', in the end it is the human who is given divine agency through this revelatory sublime (1757: 79-81). The human mind, 'so entirely filled with its object', engenders a state of 'astonishment' beyond 'admiration, reverence and respect' (63), and the transport evoked by this encounter is contained in the human response. As Peter Otto explains, such transport involves 'a moment of vision that reveals the immanent ground of the unity of mind and nature … the mind expands; it feels god-like' (26). As the imagination gains enrichment from unexpected moments of violent tension between attraction and repulsion, the observer's sense of self is reinforced and inflated. The encounter positions the imagination centrally and credits the observer's emotive capabilities. The sublime still gestures towards an incomprehensible world, but a transcendent God is no longer central to this process.

The most immediate response to the sublime is my focus here. This initial response can be described as a blockage, or a freezing; a feeling of 'baffled desire' (Otto 2011: 238). The body is held in stasis with overwhelming wonder. This is followed by a sensation of elevation, where 'the disjunction between what the mind can imagine and what nature, history, and God can present' becomes 'an indirect presentation of the power of the imagination' (244). This moment

of transport leads to a final stage of self-inflation, where the self is – for the time being – satisfied that the inexplicable encounter has been creatively resolved. I suggest that sublime metamorphosis can occur in the space between the first stage of blockage and the second stage of elevation. In this moment of wonder, attuned to its interruption, the imagination has the capacity to allow transformations otherwise not possible.

Immanuel Kant, following Burke, also contrasts the sublime to the beautiful, but more rigorously privileges the mind over the body, and more clearly deifies the imagination. For Kant, where the 'ground' that is 'external' to the self is found in 'the Beautiful of nature', the sublime is found *in* the self through an 'attitude of thought' (1790: ch 23, np). The senses are not directly involved. Kant's sublime is a 'purposive' and 'supersensible' response, a 'movement of the mind' that creates a sense of self-expansion (ch 24, np). The horror or terror inflamed in moments of sublime encounter involve an imaginative response less 'transcendental' than 'aesthetical' (ch 8, np).

The postmodern sublime questions the Romantic notion of the supersensible, opening the way for the posthuman sublime to collapse the body/mind dichotomy. I suggest that in the moment of metamorphosis, a collaborative co-affectivity between species can emerge. Sublime metamorphosis is closely related to the potentiality outlined for the postmodern sublime. For Jean-François Lyotard, the Romantic sublime, and its contrast to the beautiful, signals the moment when 'aesthetics asserted its critical rights over art' allowing for modernity, standing as Romanticism, to have 'triumphed' (1988, 92). The postmodern sublime is activated by the Romantic sublime but, as Lyotard puts it, 'it isn't [the Romantic thinkers'] sublime anymore' (93). The space created by the postmodern sublime, that allows for the 'unknowable' in art, creates a generative 'indeterminacy' that exists without preordination (104, 110). In his later more detailed analysis of the sublime Lyotard goes on to argue that the 'enigma' of the sublime questions the division between object and subject, mind and matter. Such thinking allows the co-affectivity between humans and nonhumans suggested in sublime metamorphosis that I discuss below.

The moment of arrest that begins the Romantic sublime is vital in the postmodern sublime, even though, by definition, the final self-reinforcing stage is not reached. This is why the postmodern sublime is sometimes referred to as the failed sublime. However, as Lyotard shows, this very indeterminacy allows transformation through the infinite realities suggested in the moment of wonder (1988: 127). As Lyotard points out, change can only occur if the 'presumption of the mind with respect to time' is undone, and this 'privation', he suggests, is found in the 'sublime feeling' (107). Thus, while the transformative potential in the emotive arrest after the moment of blockage can be activated with or without resolution in the Romantic sublime, it is more likely to emerge in the fragmented postmodern sublime.

At this juncture, the question of subject/object must be considered ethically. Emmanuel Levinas has provided the insight that humans are subject-to the other, demonstrating humans feel through their relations with others. Sensation is subject-to the other (1994: 127). Levinas' consideration of subjection can be applied, with care, to nonhumans, as well as humans. As the human is subject-to, so too is the non-human. In this mutual subjection, crossings may occur. Deborah Bird Rose expands Levinas' conclusion that to be human is to witness through affective relations to the other, by her allowance for such witnessing to include nonhuman others (2013: 8). Rose celebrates possibilities of change in human/nonhuman relations, including potential departures from dominant misapprehensions of human privilege and exceptionalism. This posthuman perspective gives sublime metamorphosis its productivity.

It is not, however, possible for an absolute understanding of the world to be provided through sublime metamorphosis. As Jean Baudrillard argues, such efforts lead to the false hyperreal.

Better, he suggests, to understand that 'gods can only live and hide in the inhuman, in objects and beasts that escape humanity's 'subjective stupefaction' (2001: 200). This is the possibility and the limitation in sublime metamorphosis. It allows for a new sublime through a collaboration between the beingness of humans and that of nonhumans, but containing that sublime in human understanding is an act of deception. The best humans can do, at this point, is attend to affect.

In the moment of sublime arrest, humans and nonhumans may respond with and to each other in ineffable but affective ways. Carter and Wood depict such encounters, disturbing human/nonhuman boundaries through the potentiality of metamorphosis. In this they demonstrate an openness to the posthuman witness outlined by Rose, through Levinas. Rebecca Schneider's argument for a more radical ethic of writing has relevance here. For Schneider, mimetic writing is that which makes room for standing *with,* in contrast to the erasure that can accompany representation, or standing *for*. Schneider's concerns revolve around human representations, but her critique also applies to nonhuman representations.

Carter and Wood write towards mimesis rather than representation. The sublime metamorphoses in their texts activate a sensation of being subject-to, no matter that sometimes the arrest takes place in a period so short as to be almost imperceptible. This can be, as these writers demonstrate, time enough to question human centrality. The wonder allowed by the disruption offered through the posthuman sublime opens the opportunity for elaboration or change. For Baudrillard, divisions between the beautiful and the sublime no longer make sense in an ecstatic hyperreal world (2001: 186-7). However, the disequilibrium apparent in the sensation of wonder refuses the category of reality and illusion in terms of the as-is. It is this disequilibrium which allows for the possibility of change.

The moment of arrest, where wonder is felt, but not resolved, and the world is no longer as it was previously understood, can be a violent intervention. Such interventions, that can potentially change stasis, may be uncomfortable, not least for the rapidity of their affect. Erin Manning suggests that attention to a field that disallows previous 'knower-known relations' can change perspectives in ways that embrace 'what must remain ineffable' (2016: 30-31). The posthuman sublime may be one route to this violence of 'thought' that 'cuts' and 'skews' and 'reorientates', allowing for the possibility of 'what else' (230). When this moment of wonder applies to relations between humans and nonhumans, it may be threatening, but it may also allow space for radical repositioning of creaturely relations. This potential can undermine the logic of the industrial complex concerned with animal agriculture that has been described through animal studies scholars and activists such as Dinesh Wadiwel (2015). Human exploitation of nonhuman lives is a core cause of current threats to human and nonhuman habitats (Cederberg et al: 2012). The violence of this interruption, then, is crucial in this time of ecological duress.

The central protagonists in the speculative fiction of Carter and Wood feel this violence as they allow themselves to be still in the moment of blockage. Readers may also stay in this space for long enough to respond in new ways to the nonhumans that form part of their unknowable world. These moments of equivocal pause resist the individualist resolution found in the Romantic sublime. The potential result is a shift from the human orientation achieved in the necessarily incomplete postmodern sublime. The sublime metamorphoses in these two postmodern Gothic novels allow the protagonists to become different animals to those they were before. Such depictions clearly shift from the anthropocentric shape-shifting episodes in earlier Gothic texts.

Metamorphosis is depicted in some of the earliest Romantic Gothic texts. In Mathew Lewis' *The Monk,* one of the genre's earliest and best-known texts, the victim/temptress Matilda

becomes a satanic beast with bat-like sable wings and ophidian hair (1796: 433). Following this tradition, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'Cristobel' (1816) and John Keats' 'Lamia' (1820) present treacherous women as snakes. This humanist perspective, that centralises the human at the expense of other species, continues into the Victorian Gothic. In Bram Stoker's *Dracula* the Count scales walls 'just as a lizard', his feet finding crevices in ways beyond human capabilities (1897: 39). He also carries contagion as a rat. The wolfish Mr Hyde in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) continues this tradition. The human bats, snakes, lizards, rats and wolves of the Gothic have survived, revenants as they are, through to contemporary popular culture. These not-quite human doublings leave space for a radical re-ordering of human/nonhuman relations when 'subject-to' takes on a posthuman inflection.

Carter and Wood achieve this alterity through perspectives that are more theriomorphic than anthropomorphic. That is, their characters adopt nonhuman traits rather than the other way around. Such work aligns with the becoming-animal theorised by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Deleuze and Guattari argue that one way to become-animal is by writing *in* response and *for a* response from those who do not write. 'We think and write for animals themselves. We become animal so that the animal also becomes something else' (1991: 109). This is not the 'experienced sympathy' of representation, but rather a 'produced resemblance' closer to Schneider's mimesis (173). It is a 'triumph' of 'nondistinction', Deleuze and Guattari argue, to 'dissolve forms and impose the existence of a zone' where it is not possible to say if an animal is human or nonhuman (173). Peter Heymans has linked this concept of animal-becoming with the aesthetic of the sublime, noting a shared focus on the 'confrontation with an otherness' that is so strong it 'arrests the self's cognitive … beyond a certain threshold' (Heymans 2011: 7).

While not undermining the emancipation suggested by Deleuze and Guattari's becoming-animal, Heymans notes Carol Adams' concerns regarding conflations between women and nonhumans. For Adams, when humans are represented as nonhuman, they are necessarily understood as victims (2003). As I will outline in my next section, this function is apparent in Carter's boy as dog and Wood's girl as meat. In accord with Adams, Heymans reconciles this difficulty by arguing that becoming-animal is only an 'emancipating performance' when both parties are affected 'equally' in ways that destabilise 'human and animal identity' (19). This, as Heymans makes clear, requires a willingness to follow unstable and unfinished pathways beyond 'conventional conceptions of human-animal relations' (23). The ability of literature to perform this act is the challenge I face in my own writing. I am encouraged by Carter and Wood, who both move in this theriomorphic direction.

Carter and Wood, in different ways, extend earlier Gothic texts where shape-shifting reinforces what it is to be human. Using mimetic writing (writing *with*, not *for*), they seek the theriomorphic perspective envisaged by Heymans. In the moment of metamorphosis, they create a space of wonder where readers might imagine less hierarchical human/nonhuman negotiations. The sublime metamorphoses in these texts embrace Gothic literature's tendencies to unsettle the contained self, activating a reflexive linguistic playfulness that extends this destabilisation into an unresolved fragmentation of the human self. This postmodern inflection in sublime metamorphoses involves modes of encountering the unknowable world of the nonhuman as an open sensate 'self' with a plurality beyond the body, even as that body carries the mind through every last cell and synapse from skin to the cortex.

As process philosophy has established, humans are always under composition with other nonhuman formations at a molecular level, constantly exchanging bacteria, pheromones and energy. The nonhuman is, in this way, both of the human, and alongside the human. Steven Shaviro' extends the sublime through his 'speculative aesthetics' that counter materialist determinist contingency (2014: 132). Acknowledging human/nonhuman interconnectedness

through affect in-the-moment is a powerfully subversive act. The co-affectivity depicted by Carter and Wood thus gestures towards new ways of being-with; of being mutually subject-to.

Carter and Wood depict these two-way interconnections in the movements of their main protagonists. Carter's Marianne and Wood's Yolanda escape human enclosure, as they become Tiger Lady and rabbit, respectively, and these creaturely shifts involve an emergence that is not predicated on human patterns. The openness of their bodies to iterative transformations shift their understandings of the world. As their bodies embrace this potentiality, nonhuman transmutations shift them to still more indeterminate positions. Conceptually and physically open, further potentialities are conceived and materialised.

It is this intra-animal activity that separates sublime metamorphosis from the Romantic sublime and the postmodern sublime. Sublime metamorphosis, at least in part, answers Shaviro's philosophical challenge for the aesthetic of the sublime to break free of 'correlationist assumptions' that continue from the Romantic sublime, with its Kantian ideas of a 'fundamental noetic-neomatic structure', that is, the object and the act, the content and the becoming (2014: 7). It also complicates the hyperreal simulacrum that concerns Baudrillard. Assumed causality, Shaviro argues, is defective for the way it corrals objects (humans, nonhumans, molecules and other conglomerations of matter) into constrictive humanist understandings. Instead of such thinking, Shaviro offers an 'aesthetic of allure', where human and nonhuman discourse and materiality are involved in the moment of encounter (42). Rather than limiting such encounters to predictable causal effects, alluring encounters between separate properties can be perceived as negotiated and open to change. In this aesthetic, language is only one part of the dynamics at work, as humans respond to encounters that move through their skin and conceptualisations. Making space for this two-way materiality between humans and other embodied formations involves understanding attraction and retreat as not wholly controlled by human intent or understanding.

As Carter and Wood imagine what it is to be nonhuman, they do not reinscribe the human. Rather, they depict moments of sublime metamorphosis that depart from the correlationality that marks the Romantic sublime and the postmodern sublime. Their protagonists dwell in the ineffable moment of sensate excess and become other than human in ways that refuse human exceptionality. This suggests an aesthetic 'that is not limited to human judgement and not centred on human subjectivity in particular' (Shaviro 2014: 12). Their open bodies form, with their minds and other nonhuman minds, and their open minds form, with their bodies with other nonhuman bodies.

As I discuss below, the reflexivity of Carter's still-contemporary postmodern novel *Heroes and Villains* challenges human/nonhuman divisions, focusing on where the character, Marianne turns her entrapment into escape through her refusal to accept humanist boundaries.[2] Wood's *The Natural Way of Things* traces her character Yolanda's transgression of human boundaries in opposition to a confinement she refuses to accept, contrasting this with the responses of others, including her cell-mate Verla. Marianne and Yolanda are analytically sensate characters. They pause in the moment of horror and/or terror they experience when encountering the sublime, and take time enough to refuse anthropocentricity. In this interruption they find new possibilities in human/nonhuman relations.

The posthuman perspectives of Carter and Wood contest the Romantic idea of 'Nature' as a fictionalised loyal subject who exists to meet human needs. Timothy Morton has roundly argued that 'nature' is the 'ultimate lost object' that does not exist 'out there' in an authentic 'world' (2012: 252). To consider objects as natural or unnatural makes no sense when the 'existence of an object' with its own autonomy, 'is irreducibly a matter of co-existence' (2013: 44). This schema disallows divisions of natural and human-made, whether they are a

comparison between a rabbit, a human, and a box of department store delights (Wood) or a distinction between a lion, a human and a wedding dress (Carter). Ideas of the natural and the unnatural obscure the ineffable co-affectivity between beings.

The construct of 'Nature' has been differently undermined by Ursula Heise. Like Morton, she historicises this category as part of a metanarrative of modernity that stretches back into the Romantic period. Further, she notes that 'humans today live in environments pervasively shaped by humans themselves, to the point where a natural realm outside the impact of human agency no longer seems to exist' (2010: 50). The critique suggested by Wood's title is made clear when the 'way' of 'nature' appears as a method to constrain her characters by their gender (2016: 176). The binary of Carter's title is also deeply ironic. Just as ideas of heroes and villains mutate in this text, so too do human and nonhuman categories transform in this novel's radioactive world.

Angela Carter's *Heroes and Villains*

Heroes and Villains is set in an unspecified apocalyptic future suffering the consequences of nuclear radiation. Three different human potentialities vie against each other in this newly unknown world. The Professors, an agrarian intelligentsia, are in constant conflict with the nomadic Barbarians. This warring state sets them apart from the abject Out People, who live beyond the alternative normalcies of the other two groups. The separations are artificial. In Carter's speculative future, gene codes are awry. The mutations suffered by the Out People are uncontained and seep into the worlds of the Barbarians and Professors.

Mutations are not always obvious and never complete. Marianne has left the Professorial enclosure but is not a Barbarian. All animals, including humans, are in a state of flux, or becoming. The flinty Marianne looks hard at Jewel, her lover and enemy, and he looks at her with equal intent. They are both 'interesting specimens' who may or may not be fully human (1969: 29). Relations with creatures of other species are unfixed and constantly negotiated because of these mutations. When a lion is 'bent over the man', it is not clear that Jewel is in fact a 'man' (153). He has gone to sleep in a 'dark silence' where language no longer has relevance, making a hole to sleep in 'like a black fox which has gone to earth' (153). Like the displaced humans, other creatures, including the 'lions' and 'tigers' once kept in cages 'for information', negotiate for space and food on their own muscular but variable terms in a constantly changing world (11). This lion sniffs, rather than attacks, and Marianne watches transfixed. Jewel thinks he is dreaming and Marianne dreams of mutation.

Marianne's transformation into Tiger Lady is enabled by this world that allows for cats such as she a certain indeterminacy. Some cat are wild, some choose to stay in the laps of the Professors and some are involved in what it is to be a woman. For Jewel, the Out People are 'worse than wolves' for their propensity to drop down from trees to rip out eyes (33). They are almost as terrible as cats. Jewel's brothers suspect the vaginas of Professor women – like Marianne – are lined with sharp feline teeth. Marianne has heard that the Barbarians sew cats into the uteruses of the women they rape. In this world where boundaries are constantly negotiated through transmutative stories, animal strength holds primacy.

Marianne's readiness for metamorphosis is apparent in her first encounter with the Barbarians. Breathlessly she notes they are 'dressed in furs and brilliant rage' (6). When she rescues Jewel from her own people, he attempts to warn her away, citing Alfred Lord Tennyson's 'In Memoriam'. The Barbarian existence is 'red in tooth and claw' (21). Curious within her fright, as attracted as she is repelled, Marianne is open to mutating towards Barbarian ways of living. She assumes 'the pelt of a red fox', taking its warmth from the sleeping Jewel, even as she

fantasises about killing him (24). Her willingness to move towards new modes of creatureliness, with Jewel, takes her into long nights where they create a 'dual being', an 'erotic beast' with 'teeth and claws' (97). Towards the end of the novel, as she and Jewel begin to part, when Marianne feels the cold, she 'furred herself up' (147). She begins to manage her mutations on her own. Soon after, Marianne explicitly blurs human and nonhuman divisions in her decision to become Tiger Lady.

The liberating metamorphosis of Marianne is countered by Carter's description of a more enervating human/nonhuman crossing. The son of shaman and/or charlatan Donally, strange at first sight for his 'greenish pallor', shows the risks in shifting beyond human containment (15). Donally's son is often 'chained to a staple in the wall, gnawing upon a bone' (41). There is none of the growth in Marianne's furring up, none of the will in Jewel's foxy silence. The boy suffers a process of dehumanisation 'at the end of his chain' (54). Rather than being transformed into a more agential being, he is reduced by his nonhuman status. When fed by the unwholesome Mrs Green, 'scarping food' into his dish, he ineffectually yelps and strains against his tether (64). The hierarchy of human/nonhuman relations is skewed back to human domination. There is none of the fraught equality between Jewel and the lion, none of the transformation where Marianne's foxy fur is part of her path to Tiger-Lady. Jewel 'stroked and clapped the boy with his free hand', his physical domination reinforcing his control, even as 'they murmured to one another at the back of their throats as if in brutish communication' (65). Marianne becomes part of these masterful relations. When she gets ready for the wedding she'd rather not have, Donally's son looks at her, 'hiding his face in his paw' until Mrs Green 'shoos him into his kennel like a good boy' (73). Later, shockingly, Marianne sexually abuses the boy in an act of vengeance against the sexual abuse she has suffered from Jewel. There is no growth in these relations. All is regression, stasis or conflict.

These non-generative human/nonhuman relations are, in part, explicated as an expression of power predicated on fear. The boy is kept on a leash because Donally is 'frightened of him' (137). Similarly, Jewel rapes Marianne because he's 'very frightened' of her (62). Yet, the novel also provides a counter to this idea of violence as a corollary of fear. Donally tells Marianne that she must 'remain terrifying' if she is to have any hope (57). Marianne applies this lesson in her metamorphosis towards Tiger Lady. In the world she is creating, manufactured fear is powerful. She pounces on Mrs Green's grandchild Jen, when this young girl tells Marianne she wants her in a cage, like the stuffed snake Donally carries around. Jen wants to 'come and poke a stick through the bars' (71). Marianne 'snarls' at Jen and her cohort 'with considerable ferocity' until 'they scattered' in fright (71). Becoming assertively nonhuman, rather than humanly fearful, is of strategic value to Marianne. In contrast, Donally's son demonstrates that causing fright does not necessarily lead to liberation. The boy becomes a dog by his own volition, but through his needy ferocity he finds himself chained and vulnerable.

Unlike Donally's son, Marianne will not allow herself to be captured into submission. Circled by the dead Jewel's lascivious brothers, she refuses to be quiet, she will not be 'shut up' (157). Language unlocks her gendered cage. In her terror, she gives herself time to feel 'the beginnings of a sense of power' (157). In this emergent position of strength Marianne chooses a new physical and social role. She will 'be the Tiger Lady and rule them with a rod of iron' (163). She will maintain her relations with the Barbarians on her terms. Extending Donally's advice she determines to 'frighten them so much they'll do every single thing I say' (163). She may stay, as some of the smaller feline creatures stay with the Professors, or she may escape, as other big cats do, into the recreating world, but either way she is positioning herself to attract, with her Lady-self and repel, with her Tiger-self in ways that cannot be put into words. She has mutated into a sublime new being, surviving by the snarl in her tongue.

Charlotte Wood's *The Natural Way of Things*

In Charlotte Wood's speculative novel, *The Natural Way of Things*, Gothic in its themes of enclosure and isolation, a small group of older girls are forcibly removed from their lives and imprisoned on a remote sheep farm, surrounded by an electrified fence.[3] They have three keepers (ostensibly carers) Boncer, Teddy and Nancy. The girls have just one thing in common, they have all been publicly denigrated for male abuse of their bodies. The two central characters, Yolanda and her roommate Verla, respond to their incarceration in different but sympathetic ways that involve, to varying degrees, sublime metamorphosis.

In the opening scenes, Yolanda is leashed, shorn, and forced through a door, 'sprawling, exactly as a sheep would totter down a slatted chute into the shocking light and hit and terror of the sheep yard' (2015: 17). Verla goes through a similar trauma. She is put on 'a slender little lead' and 'coaxed' as if she were a small dog with 'a little tug on the lead' that puts her so off-balance that she 'lurches forward' (19). The same treatment is served out to all the girls. Any resistance is violently quashed. The keepers have sticks, prods, spear guns. They have strength and power. They have the girls afraid. The bodily impact of imprisonment is understood by Yolanda through the fecundity of her brother's mice, tipped out to freedom so there is room in his cage for the next set of babies. She sees this 'cold, incessant production' as part of the cause for her containment (31). The girls are as chained as Donally's son, through no volition of their own.

Verla and Yolanda respond differently to their incarceration. Yolanda has been brutalised to a point that she has 'no self inside that thing they pawed and thrust and butted at, only fleecy, punishable flesh' (122). Verla has been seduced, not raped. This gives her a misplaced sense of superiority, reinforced by the value she puts on her education and experience. She sets herself apart in judgement over the other girls. When food is slopped out after a day of extreme physical work, she resists the urge to 'lick' up the 'lurid, watery residue' (45). She is sure there has been a mistake. She will be rescued. She watches her hungry co-workers 'lunge at their dishes like dogs', and as they 'breathe through their mouths like animals' she tells herself that unlike them, she 'is not an animal' (46). Scarce food and continued hard labour change her mind. After it rains and the grass grows, Verla 'gets down on her hands and knees', crawling, then sleeping in the 'soft mounds' of the ground (134). This is the beginning of her realisation that being nonhuman on her own terms might be a better option than being dehumanised for her vilified gender. Soon after, when critically ill, she dreams that she is 'a little brown trout very still in the water' (138). Later, hallucinating after tactically imbibing a mushroom of unknown properties, Verla again sees 'her sleek, speckled fish body' (196). It gives her pleasure, knowing this 'brown trout within herself' (197). Later, this vision will provide her with a physical escape.

As the season turns, so too do the girls. Verla observes their clipped 'hair returning as thick as pelts over their heads, like possum fur' (110). The more radicalised Yolanda has begun to understand that the womanhood that 'had blossomed inside her all her life, purged but regrowing, unstoppable, every month', has also made her 'meat' that is 'born to make meat' (122). Yolanda's recognition of her meat-making body frees her to leave her humanness behind. Verla follows, taking her own time to lose her loyalty to human predispositions.

Food becomes scarce once the keepers are abandoned by their higher masters and the power relations in the novel shift as Yolanda puts some rusted rabbit traps to use. As provider she is able to degrade the vicious Boncer, returning his abuse with contemptuous pity (139). Verla observes this and, like Yolanda, begins to work more productively in the moments of horror that have previously held her captive. She sees that Teddy is scared. He fears the 'lice eggs in their matted hair' and 'their thin feral bodies, their animal disease and power' and 'their small

grey teeth' (150). Cognisant of this fear, Verla becomes predator alongside Yolanda. She remembers seeing dingoes, like 'a line of strange laundry' growing 'stiff and leathery over the years' and imagines the same for Teddy, Boncer and Nancy (151). She too, is finding new way of living in her skin.

These gestures towards human/nonhuman crossings become increasingly material as Yolanda shifts from being a killer of rabbits to a creature becoming rabbit. When she finds her first killed rabbit, she experiences an 'ancient' throb from her new role as hunter (157). As she gains strength Yolanda assumes a 'new costume', an 'armour of bloody flapping skins and steel' (169). She begins to dream of being able to 'outrun [Boncer], through the grass, across the fields and up along the ridge, the scrub whirring by as she hurtled', with nonhuman speed, 'spinning across the land' (178). She wears the rabbit skins closer, curing them with the fat of her prey's brains (192). The more she kills, the more she says sorry and thank you to the rabbits she traps. Finally, struck by a dead buck's 'particular beauty', the 'carved elegance of the ears' and the 'subtle tortoiseshell pattern of its fur', she is 'halted' in a 'moment' (208). Her gaze jolts to the side, taking in a different view, a rabbit birthing, unable to move. The increasingly leporid Yolanda takes the pregnant doe into her skins. From meat that makes meat, to rabbit that preys upon rabbit, now she is meat nurturing the making of meat. She feels a 'throb' then a 'wet warm slide' and she walks, 'tenderly, curving and cupping the mother and the soft web bulbs of the babies with her arms and her body' (210). In a confused process, the mother and the babies all die. Yolanda sees herself newly through the death she has made the rabbits subject-to.

Yolanda is devastated but she also feels a 'primitive strength mounting', a 'vigour to do with the air, and the earth', involving 'muscle sliding around bone' and 'animal speed and scent and bloody heartbeat and breath' (193). She has become 'Beyond human, even' (193). She dreams of 'an animal freedom', imagines going 'inwards, downwards, running on all fours, smelling the grass and the earth as familiar as her own body' (237). Her human voice is disappearing. Near the edge of the fenced property, hunting, she sees a hot air balloon, full of waving people. She is transfixed. She 'roared her trapped animal's cry' but can do no more. (240). Ready words have left her. She has transformed. Her potential rescuers remain observers, popping champagne as the wind carries them on. Yolanda's nonhuman gains are her human losses. This is the last time Yolanda thinks of returning to her human ways.

Verla feels Yolanda leave. Clambering into her friend's 'furry nest', looking for warmth as did Carter's Marianne with Jewel, Verla realises it is not 'the pulse of another human heart' in the bed with her (245). Yolanda is becoming 'almost all animal', a nonhuman who 'will not wrap Verla in her precious skins, will not hold her hand' (284). Yolanda now sees the world, Verla thinks, through 'the workings of her rabbit mind, not her girl mind' (287). Soon she 'no longer comes into the house' and 'eats with her hands' (292). The other girls have changed into 'wild creatures such as they have never been in the ordinary world' yet they are still contained in their human skins (299). It is only Yolanda who leaves her humanness behind.

When, at last, it comes time to leave to another unknown place, with a new lackey of the masters that first imprisoned them, a bus driver bearing gifts, Yolanda absconds. She pleads with Verla to also run. Verla 'looks into the small dark animal eyes' of her friend and says she wants to go home (300). Verla holds her tight, 'smells Yolanda's animal breath, feels the quick fine skeleton beneath her skin' (305). Yolanda's 'speedy heart drumming in the burrow of her chest' makes it clear she will not wait for Verla to change her mind, and as the bus approaches, with a 'silver flash' Yolanda flees, 'swift through the grass' (305). Verla, the last girl to get on the bus, is harshly prodded by the driver for her lack of enthusiasm. The other girls have rushed on,

seduced by cleansers and other treats presented in extravagant bags that reinforce female containment and consumption.

As the bus eases its way through the automatic gate of the electrified fence, Verla sees Yolanda, 'a little furred figure sprinting low alongside the great wall of bus', who, once through the temporary aperture, 'veers away, spinning low and fast as a rabbit off into the scrub' (308). Verla has, through long experimentation, a fatal mushroom at the ready, but she desists from her suicide plan when an inexplicable 'fine grey blur spinning through the grass' comes 'across the plains' into her 'centre' (310). In this moment of sublime arrest Verla is struck by wonder and changes her mind. She stands, demands to be freed. The driver refuses, he wants all the live cargo he can carry. Miraculously, Verla is assisted by the girls who have been 'made strong by labour and brutality' (312). They insist that the driver let Verla out, although, devastatingly, they do not demand their own freedom. Verla, inspired by Yolanda who is 'already far away, fully animal, released,' is left alone, on the side of the road (312). Her friend is gone, 'vigorously alive in her rabbit self' (313). Yolanda's evolution triggers Verla's memory of 'that other self of her own' and with a twitch she becomes a 'little brown trout' (313). She swims into her new being and heads for a fate that she chooses.

Intersections between the oppressions of women, the exploitations of nonhuman animals and the act of writing towards sublime metamorphosis

The productive work in Carter's *Heroes and Villains* and Wood's *The Natural Way of Things* evidences the analogous relations between the feminist struggle for equality and the interrelated need for nonhuman justice. As Carol Adams insists, equality can only come with a shift from oppressive 'pleasurable consumption of consumable beings' (2003: 13). These texts imagine species hierarchies and boundaries away, showing better human/human relations as more likely when the oppression of nonhuman animals is lifted. This work is most powerful when the texts evoke sublime metamorphoses. Marianne as Tiger Lady and Yolanda as rabbit follow a theriomorphic pathway that opens them to new ways of being. Through their transformation, they unsettle what it is to be human.

As Carter and Wood write their nonhuman identities towards new forms of emancipation, mimesis, rather than representation, makes their approach effective. In Schneider's terms, Marianne and Yolanda stand-*with*, rather than stand-*for* the nonhumans they encounter, taking the risk identified by Schneider, of ending up standing *as*. As the situation of Donally's son's illustrates, when standing *with* becomes standing *as*, disappearance rather than transformation can result.

Writers interested in portraying sublime metamorphosis through characters that stand *with* the nonhuman enter into the 'risk and vertigo' that accompanies Baudrillard's hyperreal where affect no longer has relation to its opposite (187). In my own practice, I face the possibility of my work becoming inaccessible if its characters are too nonhuman to be humanly understood. Equally, I will have failed if my depictions are too anthropomorphic to be convincing. Carter and Wood both manage this difficult balancing act. Their success encourages me to maintain my direction. Perhaps even the smallest effort to provide a more-than-human point of view is a step in the right direction. A standing *for* is better than not standing at all.

One way I can better write from a nonhuman point of view, is by seeking the noncorrelationist approach suggested by Shaviro. For Shaviro, noncorrelationality is 'an aesthetics that is not limited to human judgement and not centred on human subjectivity in particular' (2014: 12). Such 'noncorrelationist thought' is 'nonintentional, nonreflexive and most often nonconscious' (12). This attention can allow writing to emerge through a two-way dialogue with nonhuman

perspectives, as far as this is humanly possible. Erin Manning and Brian Massumi offer a methodology for this that involves leaving space for modes of thought that are not, as they put it, 'neurotypical', through paying a 'patient attention to what the field wants' (2014: 3, 4). I extend their work from the visual and performing arts to suggest that creative writing might also benefit from this 'entranced' attention while not contained to 'normal' human hierarchies (4). In paying attention to the field, in this state of wonder, I have the opportunity to move towards the possibility of encounters that make space for sublime metamorphosis. If I manage open attentive waiting, as part of my practice, this may lead to an ability to offer a mimetic speaking-with, through what emerges from the field. Such efforts may well engender more equal human/nonhuman relations. As Shaviro points out, this change will be more likely if my depictions involve a responsive openness to the 'indirect touch' and 'transfer' that is 'directly communicated' in the event of encounter (138, 151). My novel's sublime encounters, to be metamorphic, must evade human causality.

In writing sublime metamorphosis, the senses are as important as cognition. The responses of Marianne and Yolanda, and, to a lesser extent, Verla, show the vicarious and transformative affect of their encounters. Dwelling within the sublime arrest, they create new spaces in which to negotiate their transactions with the world, becoming-animals in ways that would not be possible in more human-centred depictions of the sublime. The self is no longer unified through the imagination (as in the Romantic sublime), or, perhaps, even human (most aspects of the postmodern sublime). Such multiple subjectivities extend the moment of arrest. Between dissonance and sense-making, pre-existing human-centred assumptions might be put aside.

Speculative fiction is a powerful vehicle for imagining the sublime, and as outlined earlier, sublime metamorphosis owes its genealogy to the transgressive Gothic. Carter and Wood portray sublime metamorphosis, with its disturbance of repressive boundaries between humans and nonhumans, by entering the field of noncorrelation in ways that are enabled by the unsettled Gothic . This entry is not, however, straightforward. I must be willing to accept the possibility of readerly lack of interest, in this effort to unsettle normative human/nonhuman modes of relations. Nonhuman transmutations may not be readily understood. Yet some readers, like me, might be willing to remain in a tension not unlike a river in flood, where surface and depth co-exist in fluid unpredictable movements. Just as the protagonists in these novels are held in the terrifying beauty of emerging strangeness, and freed by the unknown depths of the other, so too may these readers respond in their own emotive depths to the interconnecting presence of nonhumans. Other readers might prefer to remain safely on human surfaces.

In *The Means*, a cross-genre speculative novel under development, I am explicitly exploring the potentiality of stepping outside one's s/kin and into the body of an other-than-human being. It is not easy to depict entranced posthuman wonder, but this is the work that must be done if I am to disturb the boundaries between humans and other animal species. To ensure mimetic writing, a standing-with, that speaks to the co-affectivity between humans and other animal species, I must know nonhumans as best I can, ideally drawing close to that which Manning terms 'speciation' (2016: 192).

If my writing is to become more theriomorphic, I must understand nonhuman animals without species bias, including the bias that comes with being human. While Vinciane Despret suggests the 'accusation of anthropomorphism' is not so much about protecting animals, as it is about critiquing science, she does propound a more anthropological perspective (2016: 40-41). Despret's interests are in zoology but her suggestion of a reflexive anthropological perspective applies to my writing practice.

At the same time. I am conscious that I am necessarily drawing on human understandings of the species I depict. This is the underlying difficulty in creating convincing nonhuman

characterisations. Human limitations cannot be escaped except through the ineffable affect of sublime arrest. It might even be possible, as Lyotard suggests, to pay attention to the points of material transfer that allow for transformation (1991: 36). My challenge is to show how such movements might make room for a creative reformation of organised being/s. The politics of this endeavour are grounded in questions of justice. Carter and Wood, in different ways, have demonstrated that mimetic posthuman sublimity can offer liberated spaces for transformative wondrous change.

Finally, my ability to activate the kind of sublime metamorphosis detailed in this paper is not just about my writing. Much is dependent on the reader's openness to pause, with the characters, in horror, terror or awe. When a novel pushes at the boundaries between human and nonhuman animals, at the point of flesh, the risk of reductionist anthropomorphism is very real. This is the challenge in writing a posthuman speculative novel. Carter and Wood demonstrate the fine art of maintaining their readers' interest when depicting new worlds that position nonhuman animals more equitably.

Maintaining open attention to the field might shift my perspective from human centralisation, but this is taking considerable time. My methodology is developing as my novel takes shape. As I focus on senses, both human and nonhuman, in a field that collapses such categories, I hope to depict metamorphoses that allow readers entry into the violent aftershock that comes with the posthuman sublime. If I can create this interruption to anthropocentric logic, I will have made some contribution to the work needed to be done to bring the world into a more equitable balance. There is no lack of evidence to show that the majority of animals on this earth, many humans included, desperately need better access to the world's food and shelter. Writers and readers have a part to play in bringing about such change.

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Endnotes

[1] I use human/nonhuman here as shorthand for human animals and nonhuman animals even as my work seeks to trouble this very distinction.
[2] I consider Carter a contemporary writer, following mainstream literary critique including recent articles in *Contemporary Women's Writing* (Oxford Press).
[3] While the physical characteristics of the incarcerated protagonists in this novel suggest they are young women, I follow Wood's terminology in referring to them as girls.

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