

## Some Remarks on Val Plumwood

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I did not know Val Plumwood well or for long. Nonetheless, I will say that both personally and collectively, her death was a real loss, not wholly tempered by gratitude for what she left behind.

I met her only once in person, and our relationship mainly involved exchanges of papers and reviews, together with comments and views, beginning in 2005. A few concerned the chapter on ecofeminism in my *Ecological Ethics*, which (along with Ariel Salleh) she kindly and patiently corrected. The last email I received from Val was dated eight days before her death. But I would like to quote from one I received on 13 April 2007:

Can I tell you how my philosophy strings get tuned? Rain overnight, and a glorious day promises. I walked from my house through tall forest to the highway to get the mail (about 9km), and then headed off to my favourite canyon lookout to witness the Yellow-Faced Honeyeater migration peak day. On the steep descent to the lookout I met a large Tiger Snake coiled possessively in the middle of a narrow ledge I had to cross to reach the lookout, so I had to find an adventurous detour, and then stay down there until the sun went off the snake's ledge. Getting back up that detour was going to be a lot harder than going down. So all day tens of thousands of small birds were flying up the valley around me in small vocal parties of ten to twenty. Today was overwhelming and inspiring. I decided to call the lookout 'Tiger Snake Lookout'. More days like this would be a blessing. I experience a terrible conflict between writing projects and wanting to be out in the nature like this -- which I have only partially resolved with my rainforest office. The problem is -- 'Walking the Talk', putting your heart where your mouth (or pen) is.

Glorious indeed! And characteristically challenging. Like many others, I suspect, I am rather more timid. Nonetheless Val was an exemplar of a set of values, insights and politics which comprise a project (let's call it) of which I too feel part -- again, I suspect, in company with quite a few others. Ultimately, the project as a whole concerns whether not only the human species, in part or even whole, but countless other forms of life, disappear, survive, or flourish. As such, it vastly exceeds what any individual or group can do -- or say. So these are simply some personal remarks about Val's contributions, and why they deserve continuing support and development.

One obvious name for her perspective is 'ecofeminism', although, equally obviously, there are other ecofeminist perspectives, related but with different emphases. This too is a big subject, so all I am going to say about it is that Val's analyses of value-laden dualisms and hierarchies, in both of her principal books, are irreplaceable. They are not more important, however, than the passion for ecocentric justice that lay behind them.

The term 'ecofeminism' itself is, I suppose, potentially divisive, although only insofar as people, mostly but not necessarily men, have "tended to react against what

feminists had to say because they were not able to separate their own personal selves from the culture of masculinity per se”. [2]

Another problem which may attend it – although again, not of its own making – is a metaphysical and semantic one. It may be irresponsible to even mention this, since I have only just begun to think and read about it, but it seems to me that one possible sense of ‘feminine’ is the contrary and/or complement of ‘masculine’, whether and to whatever extent that is a function of ‘natural’ sex and ‘cultural’ gender (a distinction that needs very careful handling), but another is that which precedes that very polarity, and indeed all such polarities, and yet can arguably still be understood as feminine. Irigaray and Kristeva, together with their critics, beckon. In any case, to the extent that this is the case, then moving unawares between these two meanings will certainly result in damaging confusion.

However, the unshakable argument why ecofeminism should be part of the eco-project and its conversations is that we humans are, without exception, embodied beings – and as such, sexuate beings. At the very least, therefore, the sexual dimension of our nature (in the broadest sense of the word) potentially affects everything we do; and there is much evidence that it actually affects nearly everything.

One of Val’s last papers was “Nature in the Active Voice”, a marvellous talk to the Melbourne Writers Festival in 2007, and there she introduced another term, identifying herself as a “Philosophical Animist”. I love this term, but more usefully let me say why it matters. ‘Philosophical Animism’ opens a door onto a vital part of Val’s lifework, and of the project for life as a whole: namely, to reimagine and begin to refashion the spiritual as *also* material and the material as *also* spiritual. Their mutual exclusion – which is, of course, also gendered to its very roots -- is the lynchpin of the damaging dualisms Val identified and worked so hard to heal.

Its context, of course, is the thousand-year-long process of disenchantment, identified as such by Max Weber among others, with its philosophical (especially Platonic), theistic (especially Christian and Islamic) and scientific (especially Cartesian) strands, which took a distinction between spiritual and material and made of it an ever-increasingly dogmatic and fundamental gap. Having, he thought, securely positioned himself on the spiritual side under the aegis of God, ‘man’ now finds himself raddled with fear (or defiantly confident) about becoming stranded on the other side. But such a split *itself*, and identification with *either* side, is a major metaphysical driver of, as well as rationalisation for, ecocide; and ecocide includes suicide. It is, as Val showed, the philosophy of death. [3]

In such a context, any positive contribution must be partial and limited. Val’s, it seems to me, is best set out in chapter 10 of her *Environmental Culture*, “Towards a Materialist Spirituality of Place”, together with various of her late papers. That is where she presents a counterhegemonic (and countercultural) concept of “a materialist spirituality which does not invoke a separate spirit as an extra, independent individualised ingredient but rather posits a richer, fuller intentional non-reductionist concept of the earthly and the material” (222); and, by the same token, of the spiritual as embodied, particular and contingent. [4] Together, the ‘material’ and the ‘spiritual’ manifest -- not technically or theoretically or algorithimically or necessarily, but actually or (if you prefer) phenomenologically, in lived experience – as *agency*. Rightly trying to avoid definitions which are anthropocentrically biased (i.e., which are loaded in ways that tacitly favour human beings by requiring, for example, self-conscious sentience), Val termed agency “active intentionality” (124). [5]

Another name for this project, or this part of the project – a good name, reclaiming from colonialist contempt something we need, and can use – is “animism”. [6] And since we cannot revert to being pre-colonial natives (having ourselves been colonized the longest and most successfully), “philosophical animism” for us post-colonial Earth-indigenes seems about right.

Val’s term for the overlap between this concern and that of the humanities was “ecohumanities”: a shortening, doubtless, of “ecological humanities”, the preferred Australian usage. [7] An alternative is Laurence Coupe’s “green studies”. [8] Personally, I could live with either more happily than “ecocriticism”, which seems to be gaining ground (at least in the UK and USA). One reason for my disquiet is its rationalist aura, which in my view panders to just that version of reason – setting itself over and above emotion, the body, the feminine and, in a rather vicious irony, the Earth – that all Val’s work critiqued. Another and related one is that much criticism in the humanities remains universalist and idealist, unaccompanied by any attempt to recognize its own contextual and indeed ecological rootedness, and thus limitations. Unfortunately, this *déformation professionnelle* is still prized by the academic humanities, and the unselfcritical critic often rewarded. This is unsurprising, insofar as the humanities themselves are still in thrall to the apartheid of matter and spirit or its secular version, mind; and its practitioners still like to think of themselves as authorities, or in Zygmunt Bauman’s term, legislators, of the latter. [9]

In contrast, ecofeminism, philosophical animism, and the ecohumanities alike are grounded not in representations (epistemology) but in *ways of living* (ontologies, or rather, worlds; cf. Wittgenstein’s “forms of life”); and not in essences, whether ‘natural’ or ‘constructed’, but in *relations*. These multiple relations, between embodied perspectives by no means exclusively human, *are* ecology. And whatever can in principle be mastered – or even, note, successfully ‘managed’ – is not a ‘Thou’ with whom one is in a relationship and must therefore negotiate, but an ‘It’, an object. Thus, to the extent any instrumentalist project of mastery of nature ‘succeeds’, the price will be the death of what, or rather who, is mastered. (As subject, that is; so such projects invariably begin by defining nature as an object *a priori*.) That is the true terminus of “the intelligent species’ burden” (195) extolled by such writers as Daniel Botkin, Stephen Budiansky, James Trefil and, by implication at least, William Cronon. Contrariwise, the virtues which healthy relationships require, human and more-than-human alike, are humility, respect, and reverence. [10] Fortunately, candidates for corresponding exemplars are almost equally numerous; alongside Plumwood, I would adduce Mary Midgley, David Livingstone, Stan Rowe, Neil Evernden, Deborah Bird Rose, Kate Rigby and Wendy Wheeler. [11]

I would also like to mention one point of overlap between Val’s work and my own – not because it is necessarily important but because some readers may find it interesting. On her side, that common ground comes from the moment in her near-death in the Northern Territory in 1985, *before* she became aware of the crocodile, when

Nothing stirred along the riverbank, but a great tumble of escarpment cliffs up on the other side of the river caught my attention. One especially striking rock formation – a single large rock balanced precariously on a smaller one – held my gaze. As I looked, my whispering sense of unease turned into a shout of danger. The strange formation put me sharply in mind of two things: the indigenous Gagadgu owners of Kakadu, whose advice about coming here I

had not sought, and of the precariousness of my own life, of human lives. As a solitary specimen of a major prey species of the saltwater crocodile, I was standing in one of the most dangerous places on the face of the earth. (77-78) [12]

For my part, it comes from a long involvement, scholarly as well as more personal, with divination (normally less life-threatening, although quite possibly career-threatening). For our purposes here, all that matters is my conclusion to date that divination can best be understood as negotiation for information and/or assistance with more-than-human and in some sense divine agencies. As such, divination is a kind of animism in action. [13]

One result of this confluence was a paper I published in 2006 in which I borrowed Val's experience to suggest that while divination can be encouraged, developed and trained (that is the point of its various traditions), fundamentally it is "a natural human faculty, however unevenly distributed, which will appear spontaneously in the right circumstances" (43). [14] (A faculty natural to humans, that is, in the sense of 'human animal', and by no means only ours.)

Val responded that it was an "insightful and exciting paper, which accords very well with my own views and deepens my understanding greatly [...] [and] provides some fascinating new angles" (email, 20 April 2007); and one reason for my sadness is that this particular conversation has now been cut short. I hope at least that it will be taken up by others. But let me sound a note of caution: here as elsewhere, to grasp 'natural' in the modern sense of 'naturalistic' – inertly materialist or mechanist – would be to succumb to the same sickness, already mentioned, which Val anatomised. No less mistaken (although insofar as it is much less well-funded, less harmful) is the opposite error of romantic supernaturalism or vitalism: identifying agency as purely spiritual, i.e., *supernatural*. As Gregory Bateson observed more than two decades ago, "These two species of superstition, these rival epistemologies, the supernatural and the mechanical, feed each other" (51). [15] David Abram makes exactly the same point, noting that that is how "contemporary discourse easily avoids the possibility that both the perceiving being and the perceived being are of the same stuff, that the perceiver and the perceived are interdependent and in some sense even reversible aspects of a common animate nature, or Flesh, that is at once both sensible and sensitive" (66-67). [16] Hence my call elsewhere for nature without naturalism *or* supernaturalism. [17]

In closing, I would like to emphasise this. Secularism and anthropocentrism are twin grand narratives which survived the postmodern turn all too well. Against this failure of both consistency and courage, I want to argue for the rightful and needful place of a sensibility, both post-secular and ecocentric, which recognises and revalues the spirituality as well as materiality of agency. As Val said, "I'm not talking about inventing fairies at the bottom of the garden. It's a matter of being open to experiences of nature as powerful, agentic and creative, making space in our culture for an animating sensibility and vocabulary". [18] For ASLE, surely nothing less should do. And for the project of life – which I hope ASLE, given its subject-matter, is a part of – nothing less will do.

## Notes

1. Given to an ASLE-UK conference in Edinburgh, July 2008. Thanks for encouragement to Tom Bristow.
2. Ariel Salleh, personal communication in another context.
3. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, ch. 4; see also her “Prospecting for Ecological Gold amongst the Platonic Forms: A Response to Timothy Mahoney”.
4. *Environmental Culture*.
5. “The Concept of a Cultural Landscape”.
6. See Graham Harvey, *Animism*.
7. See Plumwood, *Environmental Culture*, and “Shadow Places and the Politics of Dwelling”, <http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-March-2008/plumwood.html> (accessed 28.10.08); also the work of Deborah Bird Rose and colleagues: <http://ecologicalhumanities.org/> (accessed 28.10.08).
8. See his *The Green Studies Reader*.
9. See my “Re-Thinking Nature” and “Nature Post-Nature”.
10. Intelligent species: Warwick Fox, *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology*. More-than-human: David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*. See my *Ecological Ethics*, pp. 47-52, and “Post-Secular Nature”.
11. Midgley, *Science and Poetry*, to pick only one of her many contributions. Livingstone’s classic internal critique and exposé is *The Fallacy of Wildlife* but also see his *Rogue Primate*. For a clear-eyed review of Botkin’s influential *Discordant Harmonies*, see Stan Rowe’s “New Ecology? Give Me a Break!” See also Evernden, *The Social Creation of Nature*; Bird Rose, *Reports from a Wild Country*; Rigby, *Topographies of the Sacred*; and Wheeler, *The Whole Creature*.
12. “Being Prey”.
13. See Willis and Curry, ch.’s 4-9; also my “Grounding the Stars”.
14. “Divination, Enchantment and the Poverty of Platonism,” in Lall and Voss (eds.), *The Imaginal Cosmos*.
15. Gregory Bateson and Mary Catherine Bateson, *Angels Fear. An Investigation into the Nature and Meaning of the Sacred* (London: Rider, 1987).
16. Abram, *Spell*, pp. 66-67.
17. In my “Nature Post-Nature”.
18. “Nature in the Active Voice” (from the final page of the MS. draft).

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