

# Ecofeminism and animal advocacy in Australia: Productive Encounters for an Integrative Ethics and Politics

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**Abstract:** *The paper considers how ecological feminist philosophies can enrich the animal advocacy movement and its liberatory politics and ethics. Building on existing literature, I argue that ecofeminist theories can help deepen our thinking about our relationship with animals and the more-than-human world; about our intersectional struggle to end oppression; and about putting this into practice, especially in relation to food. I focus on the work of Australian philosopher and feminist Val Plumwood to work through these issues.*

*I examine Plumwood's critique of dualism and anthropocentrism and how it reflects a particular Australian vision of nature. Her take on animal Others also challenges the way humans hyperseparate themselves from nonhuman animals, background, homogenise and instrumentalise them through the 'the abstractly quantitative and commodified concept of meat' (Plumwood, *Environmental Culture* 156). In this perspective, veganism emerges as an essential step on a long journey towards building ethical relationships with nonhuman others. However, as animal advocates, we cannot presume that veganism is sufficient in and of itself because the exploitation and commodification of nonhuman animals is just one expression (albeit large-scale and with very significant consequences) of dualistic and oppressive ideologies used to justify the brutal domination of nature. Following Plumwood, I argue that we need to challenge deeply our systems of knowledge and the logical features of dualisms to face animal exploitation and the current ecocide, and to inform our approach to social change and activism.*

*This somewhat differs from popular analyses within critical animal studies that focus on the political economy of the animal-industrial complex and target capitalism in their fight for animal liberation. Yet, the choice between addressing ideologies and structures of oppression (including economic*

*ones) seems to be a false one, so I propose to rethink veganism along both these lines to ground it in a more ecological way, embracing the more-than-human world at large, but also in a more political way.*

**Keywords:** *ecofeminism, veganism, animals, Val Plumwood, critical animal studies, nature, ethics*

## **Introduction**

‘We don’t have to relinquish our cars, move to the woods, and get off the grid to conquer climate change. The real solution is simple and easy: eat plants’ (Runkle).

This statement, which appeared in my Facebook newsfeed last year, is emblematic of the current limitations of the animal advocacy movement in the Western world. On the surface, the movement in Australia seems concerned with ecological exploitation as evidenced by the constant reminder that animal agriculture is responsible for a good share of greenhouse gases (GHG) emissions and land clearing (Vegetarian Victoria). However in spite of this rhetoric, the movement and its outspoken advocates take an overly simplistic approach to the issues of animal and earth liberation and tend to present veganism as the be-all and end-all to save the planet and the animals, and to stop climate change (as evidenced by the above quote). I was reminded of this on a couple of occasions while thinking about, and writing this paper. Last year, my partner and I started a vegan organic (or veganic) gardening group in Melbourne to raise awareness about the exploitation of animal bodies in food production (including in organic, permaculture and biodynamic systems). We also wanted to start a conversation in the vegan community about the issues inherent in the ‘agricultural industrial complex’ (Shiva) to which some of our vegan food is linked. The interest in our group was minimal and only one person showed up at the veganic gardening blitz we had organised. For most of the (urbanite) vegans I spoke to, the fact that something is vegan is enough to be benevolent towards the environment, since as we all know, people on a vegan diet emit less GHG. There is therefore no need to investigate where vegan food comes from and who/what was harmed in the process.

Similarly, when I attended a protest to demand action on climate change in November 2013 in Melbourne with a group of animal activists, one of the male animal activists lectured a female divestment activist who had come up to our group to explain the rationale behind divesting from the major Australian banks that invest in fossil fuels and mining with their customers' money. He told her 'we are vegan, we don't support that, we are already doing the right thing for the environment.' Apart from the evident gender dynamics at play (he talked over her, cut her off and took over the conversation explaining in a patronising tone the environmental benefits of veganism) which nobody openly objected to, I was surprised by this blanket statement and the overarching assumption that vegans are already doing enough that divestment is not important.

To be clear, while I agree that veganism is an essential step in the right direction, as animal advocates we cannot presume that it is sufficient in and of itself, especially because our consumption choices are part of broader socio-economic exploitive systems supported by oppressive ideologies. Veganism is one step on a long journey towards building ethical relationships with human and nonhuman Others and this is what I would like to examine using an ecofeminist lens.<sup>1</sup>

In this paper, I look at how ecological feminist philosophies (hereafter referred to under the umbrella term of ecofeminism) can enrich the animal advocacy movement and its liberatory politics and ethics. As Richard Twine puts it, 'intersectional ecofeminist thinking' has a lot to offer the 'animal advocacy movement which can add rigor to its liberatory roadmap' ('Ecofeminism and Veganism' 191). The recent book on *Ecofeminism: Feminist Intersections with Other Animals and the Earth* edited by two prominent ecofeminists, Carol Adams and Lori Gruen, adds weight to this statement. Building on this, I argue that ecofeminist theories can help deepen our thinking about our relationship with animals and the more-than-human world; about our intersectional struggle to end oppression; and about putting this into practice, especially in relation to food.

This special issue is concerned with regional paradigms in the Asia-Pacific which fits well with the ecofeminist angle I take. Indeed, many great eco-critiques and some of the pioneers of environmental philosophy and ecofeminism were born and worked in Australia. Val Plumwood, Ariel Salleh and Freya Mathews are examples of this. Here, I focus specifically on

the work of Val Plumwood, her intersectional approach to oppression, her systematic critique of power (what she calls the ‘master model’) and her take on the animal Other. While she was opposed to what she called ‘ontological vegetarianism’, I argue that her analysis of power and dualism can help ground animal advocacy in a more coherent and ecological way, embracing the more-than-human world at large, beyond sentient animals (‘Integrating Ethical Frameworks’ 287).

To this end, I first give a brief overview of the field of ecofeminism and then explore how Val Plumwood’s work in unpacking dualisms points to intersections of domination relevant for animal advocacy. Second, I map how her analysis compares with other theories of domination popular within critical animal studies (CAS). Lastly, I explore the implications of Plumwood’s and CAS scholars’ analyses of animal advocacy and veganism, arguing that these need to be more political and more ecologically grounded. I conclude with an example of what this might look like through the practice of veganic gardening.

## **Ecofeminist insights – challenging domination, anthropocentrism and androcentrism**

### *Ecofeminism – A brief overview*

Ecofeminism is not part of the mainstream curriculum in environmental studies and it is often dismissed on charges of essentialism, but I suggest that this is mainly a mischaracterisation and that the field deserves more attention than it has received so far.<sup>2</sup> To avoid misunderstanding or stereotyping, this section establishes what ecofeminism means and what it does not. First and foremost, ecofeminism seeks to reframe feminism and broaden and situate its aim of putting an end to sexist oppression by highlighting that similar power relations and logics of domination underpin the domination of the nonhuman world. In other words, ‘within patriarchy the feminization of nature and the naturalization [and animalisation] of women have been crucial to the historically successful subordinations of both’ (Warren, ‘The Promise and Power’ 133). Ecofeminism therefore articulates the connections between different ‘oppressions, exclusions and marginalisations’ that impact nature and women in particular (but not exclusively), and how they ‘manifest on both material and conceptual levels’ in a complementary way (Mallory,

‘Ecofeminist Political Philosophy’ 308–11).<sup>3</sup> That is, historically within Western patriarchal societies women have been associated with nature and the physical realm as if they were *in essence* closer to nature, while this thinking has been used to justify the exploitation of women’s bodies and material work as well as the exploitation of nature (Gaard, ‘Interconnections’; Ruether 91). In other words, the connections between the domination of women and nature are not static or inevitable; they are ‘historical, experiential, symbolic, theoretical’ and the task of ecofeminism is to question, politicise and challenge these connections (Warren, ‘The Promise and Power’ 126). In addition, eco-feminist scholars avoid essentialising women and are attuned to the fact that the experiences of women vary and are shaped by class, race, age and their ‘lived material relationship with nature’ (Agarwal qtd in Gaard, ‘Ecofeminism Revisited’ 35). Consequently, ecofeminists call for a ‘solidarity movement’ between women rather than ‘a unity in sameness movement’ (Warren, ‘The Promise and Power’ 131).

Contrary to popular conceptions, ecofeminism is *not* an uncritical celebration of Mother Earth or Gaia, nor does it argue that the ‘goodness of women will save us’ all because women have, ‘directly and universally’, special qualities of nurturing and caring for the earth (Plumwood, *Feminism* 7–9). This simplistic and reductionist account, a form of reverse sexism, or what Plumwood calls ‘feminism of uncritical reversal’ is not useful and confronts itself to the very reality of women being active contributors to environmental destruction in some contexts (*Feminism* 31).<sup>4</sup> However, examining the ways in which gender and nature have been associated historically and reinforced culturally has much explanatory power and as ecofeminists argue, it can provide the basis for an integrated liberatory ethics and politics.

There is a great deal of diversity in ecofeminism too and ecofeminism refers more to a variety of different feminist perspectives on the connections between women and the environment than a unified approach; thus, ecofeminists do not all agree on what the common root of oppression is and how to re-evaluate the concepts of human, nature and reason (Warren, *Ecological Feminist Philosophies*). Many argue though that in Western contexts, the logic of domination of nature and women (as nature) is grounded in patriarchy and ‘value hierarchical thinking and dualisms’ (Warren, ‘The Promise and Power’ 129). More specifically, Ariel Salleh asserts that ‘Eurocentric capitalist patriarchal culture’ (13) is the culprit, while Carolyn Merchant adds that the ‘logic of science and capitalism, an intertwining of economics and rationalism’ has greatly contributed to the domination of women and nature, particularly during

European colonial expansion (Gaard, 'Ecofeminism Revisited' 28; Merchant). Ecofeminists have an 'interconnected and non-reductionist view of power' (Twine, 'New Sociologies' 11) therefore they see different forms of oppression as self-reinforcing through an 'othering' logic explored in more details in the next section (Adams and Gruen 1).

Ecofeminists (like the rest of the feminist movement) disagree on a number of issues. Notably, there is a tension within ecofeminism about the place and importance to give to nonhuman animals, speciesism and interspecies ethics. Some ecofeminists like Greta Gaard ('Interconnections'), Carol Adams ('Ecofeminism'), Lori Gruen or Marti Kheel 'foregrounded species as they addressed the intersections of feminism, ecology, race, class, gender and nation' (Gaard, 'Ecofeminism Revisited' 36) in the 1980s and 1990s, while others distanced themselves from 'animal ecofeminism' such as Karen Warren (*Women, Culture, Nature*) and Val Plumwood. The debate on animals crystallised over serving vegan meals at feminist conferences (Adams, 'The Feminist Traffic') and is still raging (Adams and Gruen; Jenkins and Twine). At a 1998 ecofeminist conference in Montana, this thorny question led Plumwood to reject the label of ecofeminism altogether to mark her difference from Carol Adams, Marti Kheel and other ecofeminist scholars she associated with 'ontological vegetarianism' (Sturgeon, 'Considering Animals'. I come back to this in the next section). Plumwood labelled her own framework 'critical feminist eco-socialist', recognising the legacy of radical traditions and socialist feminism and emphasising the political and material implications of the domination of women and nature ('Ecosocial Feminism'; *Environmental Culture* 285). Despite this alternative self-naming, Plumwood's work remains deeply embedded within ecofeminist ideas as demonstrated below and can still be brought under the umbrella of ecofeminism (others have argued similarly, see Eaton; Mallory, 'Val Plumwood'; Twine, 'Ecofeminism and Veganism'). On the other hand, the emergence of animal ecofeminism theorising the links between speciesism and sexism prefigured the rise of CAS and one of its central tenets: the recognition of the interwoven and entangled nature of systems of oppression and the need for total liberation (Best et al.; Nocella 12021).

*Val Plumwood – a critique of human mastery and dualisms*

The work of Australian philosopher Val Plumwood is one of the most comprehensive and systematic analyses of normative dualisms and anthropocentrism within the environmental philosophy and feminist literature and this is what I turn to in this section. Her work also fits well with the regional paradigm of this special issue. Indeed, I have argued elsewhere that culture and society play an important role in shaping our relationships to the more-than-human and the way landscapes are managed (Alloun and Beilin). It can be argued that Val Plumwood is representative of an Australian vision of nature and landscape as typified in her writing on this Other-and-human interaction. She draws heavily on the Australian context to develop her framework. For example, she uses the concept of colonisation and sees anthropocentrism, androcentrism, Eurocentrism and ethnocentrism as different facets of the colonising project and its effects on nonhuman nature, women and colonised people ('The Environment'). She explores the dialectic of the centre/periphery using her own experience 'of both sides of the colonisation relationship, as a member of a colonising culture (with respect to the Australian indigenous people and the Australian land)' but also to some extent as a member of a colonised one (in relation to the United Kingdom or the 'mother country', the United States and Western hegemony) ('Decolonising Relationships' 8). She examines the Australian colonising culture in relation to the treatment of Aboriginal people and to land management which relies on Eurocentric models and has had devastating consequences on the continent ('Decolonising Relationships' 15–28). As an alternative, she frames environmental ethics as a 'decolonising' process and draws some inspiration from Indigenous Australian culture on how to pursue this goal (through a revised form of ecological animism, see Plumwood, 'Nature'; Rose). Her encounters with Australian landscape and wildlife (including her famous near-death experience with a crocodile) pervades much of her writing and is also testament of the strong influence living in Australia has had on her thinking (*Eye of the Crocodile*; 'Decolonising Australian Gardens'; 'Fraser Dingo Cull').

In terms of her contribution to ecofeminism, Plumwood is well known for her work on mastery and dualisms. For her, the sources of domination and accumulation are rooted in Western culture and more specifically in the work of classical Greek philosophy, its 'rationalism' and support of value dualisms. Conceptually, the structure of domination relies on a series of hierarchical normative dualisms which exaggerate the role of reason and institutionalise and naturalise subordination. Plumwood defines dualisms as 'the construction of

a devalued and sharply demarcated sphere of otherness (...) in which power construes and constructs difference in terms of an inferior and alien realm' (*Feminism* 41–42). Plumwood developed a non-exhaustive list of dualisms (fig. 1) in her 1993 book *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* which other ecofeminists have since extended.<sup>5</sup>

culture	/	nature
reason	/	nature
male	/	female
mind	/	body (nature)
master	/	slave
reason	/	matter (physicality)
rationality	/	animality (nature)
reason	/	emotion (nature)
mind, spirit	/	nature
freedom	/	necessity (nature)
universal	/	particular
human	/	nature (non-human)
civilised	/	primitive (nature)
production	/	reproduction (nature)
public	/	private
subject	/	object
self	/	other

Fig. 1: Intersecting dualisms (Plumwood, *Feminism* 43)

Each side of the pairs involves a hierarchy when read horizontally, but they also map onto each other vertically forming a mutually reinforcing structure. In particular, the ways in which the reason/nature and human/nature dualisms map onto the male/female and mind/body play a key role in supporting the logic of domination. 'The master category of reason' is associated with human identity, the civilised, rational and free male subject, and constructed in opposition to and subordination and exclusion of the category of nature and the nonhuman (including nonhuman animals) defined as passive, lacking agency, subjectivity, and consciousness, a purely physical sphere often coded as woman/feminine (Plumwood, *Feminism* 4). For Plumwood, the ongoing overcoming and mastery of nature by dominant groups defines 'the western concept of progress and development' (*Feminism* 2). This has initiated and perpetuated strong anthropocentrism and the construction of a human identity superior, apart and 'different in kind' from nature, negating human ecological embeddedness and dependency



(Plumwood, 'Nature'). This master model is not only anthropocentric (centred on humans) justifying the domination of the nonhuman world, it is androcentric (centred on male identity) in Western contexts and therefore also justifies the superiority of men over women (Plumwood, 'The Environment').

However and in contrast to other ecofeminists (e.g. Birkeland), Plumwood is careful not to confine the 'master' category to a purely and exclusively male identity (i.e. phallogentrism). The identity of the master is complex and socially constructed 'in the context of class, race, species and gender domination' (Plumwood, *Feminism* 5), meaning that individuals 'may be placed as oppressed and oppressors' in different situations (Twine, 'New Sociologies' 4). The problem is therefore not *men* but the specific performance and practice of a culturally-informed master identity often associated with the masculine qualities of reason, domination, competition, etc. (Plumwood, *Feminism* 5–12).

Plumwood's analysis of dualisms also foregrounds intersectionality in a non-hierarchical way. The logic and discourse of dualisms connects various forms of oppressions in a web-like or network structure with 'multiple, interlocking forms of domination' mutually supporting each other in class, gender, colonial and other social and socio-ecological relationships (*Feminism* 45). In other words animal liberation, environmental and social justice are linked through these intersections of domination; so going back to my story at the start, vegans should care about destructive farming practices, divestment and sexist behaviours. Plumwood (*Feminism*) is careful to avoid prioritising one expression of domination such as sexism, racism or speciesism over others (as is the case in Marxism or social ecology) or wanting to merge them all into one (as discussed earlier, ecofeminism is adamant about the defence of alterity over sameness, and solidarity rather than union). Instead, her intersectional stance 'asks that each form of oppression develop sensitivity to other forms, both at the level of practice and that of theory' (*Feminism* 14). This echoes the calls of CAS scholars for liberation movements to work collaboratively with each other in a 'differentiated unity' (Best, *Politics of Total Liberation* xi; see also Deckha, 'Postcolonial, Posthumanist Feminist Theory').

Plumwood develops at great length 'the logical structure of dualism' and the relationships between each side of the pair (*Feminism* 47). The logic of 'Othering' applied to

nature considered ‘terra nullius, a resource empty of its own purpose and meanings’ (*Feminism* 4) is used to systematically:

- hyperseparate humans from the sphere of nature, exaggerating differences between the one and the Other
- background nature by denying our dependency on that Other
- homogenise nature, ignoring differences and diversity in the Other
- instrumentalise nature as ‘dead matter’ that can be annexed for higher human purposes associated with reason and the intellect (*Feminism* 47–55).

Given that nonhuman animals are associated with the lower and alien realm of nature and presented as devoid of reason or subjective lives, they are subject to the same treatment as the rest of nature and their domination is simply cast as natural, flowing from the same dualistic and oppressive logic. More specifically, animals conceived solely as ‘the abstractly quantitative and commodified concept of meat’ exemplify some of the key features of dualisms (Plumwood, *Environmental Culture* 156). They are subject to radical exclusion (conceived as completely different in essence from the human meat eater – denied subject-ability), homogenisation (drowning ‘in the anonymous collectivity of meat’), instrumental reductionism (sentient living beings are reduced to their flesh) and extreme commodification (*Environmental Culture* 157). Through this process, the links between animal deaths and meat are backgrounded and ignored. The logic of dualism also leads to a complete denial of the injustices taking place, and closes off any possibility for emotion or sympathy. In a similar vein, Plumwood shows how ‘reason/emotion, public/private, person/property and use/respects dualisms’ are used to articulate the contrast between different categories of animals like ‘the pet animal and the economic animal’ (*Environmental Culture* 160). She finds that these animals are hyperseparated, with pets (mostly) considered ethical subjects and worthy of our care, while farm animals are objects denied any subjectivity, commodified and reduced to flesh. Plumwood uses the movie *Babe* as an example of these dualisms being partially disrupted by the paradox of the ‘speaking meat’ found in the person of a speaking and intelligent pig granted the status of pet (*Eye of the Crocodile* 68–90). However, escaping dualisms, whether they concern animals, nature or Other humans, is far from being as straightforward as granting some privilege to devalued Others.

Indeed, what is needed involves deeply challenging our systems of knowledge and the logical features of dualisms. This entails a reconceptualisation of reason that ‘resituates humans in ecological terms and non-humans in ethical terms’ (Plumwood, *Environmental Culture* 8–9) and the construction of a ‘non-hierarchical concept of difference’ (Plumwood, *Feminism* 60). Applied to the more-than-human, it means acknowledging and making visible human dependency and continuity with nature and recognising that nonhuman Others are independent beings with agency, creative abilities and entitled to their fair share of the earth. With regard to animals, Plumwood rejects anthropocentric presumptions of mastery over them and argues against factory farms and the industrialised killing of animals under our current ‘commodified food relationships’ (*Environmental Culture* 158). However, she is not against killing animals per se and defends a ‘contextual rather than an ontological vegetarianism’ for a number of reasons beyond the scope of this paper (‘Integrating Ethical Frameworks’ 289).<sup>6</sup> She challenges the privileged status of the pet (especially in interspecies conflicts) and envisages a new and non-oppressive ‘communicative model’ with domesticated or semi-domesticated animals based on ‘friendship, protective relationship, companionship, or acquaintance’ (*Environmental Culture* 165), an ideal of ‘conviviality’ with friend, familiar or neighbourly animals (she uses the example of wombats living on her property, see ‘Decolonising Australian Gardens’; *Eye of the Crocodile* 61–67).

While Plumwood argues that rationalism and the master model have enabled the historical development of oppression, there are competing and alternative explanations that are worth examining, especially within the field of CAS. The second part of this paper tackles this challenge.

## **Critiques from the Left and implications for animal advocacy**

### *What happened to class and capitalism?*

In the face of Plumwood’s theorisation, one could argue that this deflects attention away from structural, social, and economic systems that contribute to oppression. David Nibert, for instance, argues that ‘the pursuit of material gain is the primary factor that motivates oppression’ of both humans and animals (*Animal Oppression* 274). In his detailed exposé of the

animal-industrial complex, he asserts that ‘economic exploitation or competition’, ‘unequal power between groups’ (with a focus on how power is concentrated and used by the state), and ideology are part of a mutually reinforcing and interdependent relationship that perpetuates oppression (*Animal Oppression* 274–75). Yet he goes on to argue that economic exploitation (intensified under capitalism) is the most fundamental factor, while ideology merely rationalises, legitimates and glues the socio-economic order together (*Animal Rights/ Human Rights*; ‘Origins and Consequences’). Within this Marxist explanation, the way the economic order is set up dictates the ideology and knowledge systems in place to support it; a shift in material circumstances or ‘economic motivation for oppression’ induces a shift in ideology, so targeting the economic system first and foremost makes sense (Nibert, *Animal Rights/ Human Rights* 15).<sup>7</sup> Bob Torres, following and expanding on Nibert’s framework, locates the roots of domination and oppressive forces within ‘the economic dynamics of capitalism’ and like Nibert, suggests that the fight against oppression (whether it is racism, sexism or speciesism) must involve a fight against capitalism (11).<sup>8</sup>

In responding to this, it is worth keeping in mind the brilliant deconstruction and critique of capitalocentrism by feminist economic geographers J.K. Gibson-Graham. Taking up Gibson-Graham’s concerns, I worry that placing so much emphasis on capitalism simply reifies and mystifies it while overlooking the diversity of economic organisations that exists under capitalism and foreclosing our imaginaries for a different future. More directly to the point, I would first argue that Nibert’s three factors of oppression are intimately intertwined and, as Best suggests, ideologies, or systems of knowledge and truth have material consequences (‘Introduction’ xii-xiii). Further, it is not necessary to value one above the other because, as Plumwood puts it, ‘the material and the cultural spheres both do the work of domination and may be thought of as mutually selecting one another’ (*Feminism* 42). Prioritising the economic factor and the abolition of capitalism above all else runs into the familiar danger of (Marxist economic) reductionism and assimilation of one movement to the detriment of others (see the above discussion on intersectionality). Secondly, the logic of the argument seems somewhat simplistic. One could argue for example that the economic system is an expression of a socially constructed ideology. In this perspective, ‘economic rationalism’ is another iteration of the rationalist and reductionist ideology whose goal is to ‘maximise the class of other beings that are available to be treated without ethical constraint as resources and commodities’ (Plumwood,

*Environmental Culture* 12). Capitalism, particularly in its neoliberal form, exemplifies the dualistic logic of reason/nature by systematically backgrounding and denying its dependence on its resource base, and in this sense, it is totally irrational (Plumwood, *Environmental Culture* 22–33). Hence, the strict distinction and claim of primary influence of economic considerations seem unfounded.

Other CAS scholars indeed adopt a broader perspective and echo Plumwood's take on oppression. For instance, Steven Best emphasises the role of instrumental and bureaucratic reason and their associated technique, politics and knowledge models in generating systems of domination ('Introduction'). 'The fluid dynamic merging of science, technology, mass production, capitalism, bureaucracy and hierarchical power systems' along with standardisation and growth imperatives have contributed to the emergence of an interlocking system of domination, which is hybrid and manifested through diverse industrial and capitalist systems ('Introduction' xvi). For Best, hierarchical, instrumentalist and reductionist systems of rationality have been powerful in historically and materially shaping the ways in which domination is enacted, and importantly, they can seriously impede our struggle to abolish exploitation and hierarchy ('Introduction' xxiii).

That is not to say that ideology is everything and as stated earlier, the choice between ideology, power and economics seems to be a false one. CAS scholars and others agree that our current predicament requires radical political action that challenges the structure of systems of oppression (Best, 'Introduction' xi; Nibert, *Animal Oppression* 274). This is true of ecofeminism as well, despite critiques asserting that ecofeminists 'often underplay the interlocking political and economic systems which support and benefit from those broken relationships' (Werkheiser 161). In fact, while Plumwood decentres the role of the market and capitalism in the production of ecological harms and animal exploitation, she far from discounts it and converges with Nibert and Torres by condemning the economic system for its self-maximising, instrumental and monological approach to nature and other Others (*Environmental Culture* 33). She argues against the 'servant or slave-life relations' embedded in competitive market logic which systematically 'cut-costs at the expense of the provider' (both human and nonhuman Others) ('Nature').

Plumwood also explicitly states that 'human relations to nature are not only ethical, but also political', and insists they are a matter of ethics but also of justice (*Feminism* 13). She offers

solidarity as a counter-conduct, as ‘standing with the other in a supportive relationship in a *political sense*’ and in ways that respect difference and alterity (*Environmental Culture* 202). Building on this, ecofeminist Chaone Mallory sees solidarity as ‘critical (self) consciousness that organises into political action against oppression’, including changing ‘the material conditions of the oppressed’ Other in the here and now (‘Val Plumwood’ 9–15). It could further be argued that ecofeminism is by definition political because it seeks to question hegemonic power relations and extends the sphere of the political to the nonhuman world (see Mallory, ‘Ecofeminist Political Philosophy’; Sturgeon, *Ecofeminist Natures*; Warren, *Ecofeminist Philosophy*). Historically, ecofeminism has also been an engaged praxis and movement with links to the civil rights, anti-war and anti-nuclear movements, women and environmental health, animal rights and the fight against environmental racism (Adams and Gruen; Lahar; Mallory, ‘Ecofeminism and Forest Defense’).<sup>9</sup> Arguably, casting ecofeminism as an apolitical theory and practice relies on a selective and limited understanding of ‘the political’ (Mallory, ‘Ecofeminist Political Philosophy’).

Overall, challenging ideology which makes oppression seem ‘natural, desirable and beneficial to all’ (Torres 10), decentring the human mastery narrative, taking action against the economic system that undergirds oppression and imagining alternatives are all essential aspects of a liberatory project. Drawing on CAS and ecofeminism, the next section teases out the implications of this for animal advocacy, veganism and thinking about socio-ecological change and justice.

### *Some implications for animal advocacy: ecojustice, politics and ethics*

Bringing together insights from ecofeminism and CAS can be a productive endeavour and this is what I explore in this last section in relation to veganism and animal advocacy. To begin with, I take up the idea that veganism is ‘where the struggle must start’ (Torres 131), but obviously not where it ends. In light of this, I first argue that animal advocacy must be a political movement if it is to be successful; second that it needs to move away from dualistic framing toward a more holistic and ecologically coherent approach.

First, let us examine the political interconnections. Within the animal advocacy movement, there is a tendency to focus solely on individual and personal change. Many have critiqued this ‘over-individualised [...] politics of personal virtue’ (Plumwood, ‘Integrating Ethical Frameworks’ 291) which overlooks the structural causes of animal suffering and commodification (Best, *Politics of Total Liberation*; Nibert, *Animal Rights/Human Rights*; Torres). While I do think that personal conversion to veganism is a fundamental step because ‘we must model a movement that looks like the world we want to live in’ free of oppression and hierarchies, it is unlikely that, alone, it will challenge our current systems of violence, economic rationalism and anthropocentric dualisms (Torres 145).<sup>10</sup> Individual withdrawal from these systems is not enough and veganism needs to be more than a lifestyle, and more than a consumerist one at that (I come back to this below).

We need other forms of collective and political actions for making responsible and accountable the political and economic systems behind animal suffering as well as the cultural system that maintains that ‘eating animal flesh is a matter of unproblematic personal preference’ since animals belong to the sphere of nature or passive objects (Eaton 158; see also Jenkins and Twine).<sup>11</sup> We need to ‘challenge the rationalist framework of commodification’ that reduces animals to units of production, and develop an awareness of the oppressive relationships embedded in capitalism and anthropocentrism/androcentrism (Plumwood, *Environmental Culture* 144). This involves:

– being aware of the interlocking nature of oppression and the need for a more intersectional approach as explained earlier. This awareness can be translated into political alliances or political solidarity; or at a bare minimum, avoiding offensive – racist or sexist – single-issue campaigning and using intersectionality as a self-check and self-critique.<sup>12</sup> The factory farm can be a good place to start building political alliances between animal advocacy, environmental, health and anti-capitalist movements.

– keeping in mind that ‘you cannot buy the revolution’ and that expanding consumer choices or buying vegan ‘cruelty-free’ products cannot be enough in and of itself (Le Guin qtd in Torres 123).

Second, let us turn to grounding animal advocacy more coherently in non-dualistic ecological terms. The ecofeminist analysis has significant implications for the way the animal

advocacy movement grounds itself philosophically and frames its actions practically. If we are serious about dismantling normative dualisms and hierarchies and inventing new imaginaries and new relationships with earth Others, then I agree with Plumwood that moral extensionism is not an effective strategy ('Integrating Ethical Frameworks' 295; *Environmental Culture* 144). In fact, it does not challenge human/nature and reason/nature dualisms, and simply extends the privileged category of the rational human master by admitting animals within the sphere of moral consideration to the extent that they are like us.<sup>13</sup> This approach, championed by early animal advocates like Peter Singer and Tom Regan, often uses sentience as a key criterion and means leaving out in the cold the great majority of nature and some nonhuman animals that fail the scientific 'sentience test'. It also leaves very limited conceptual and practical resources to fight the current ecocide, to demand justice for the part of nature that is deemed non-conscious and non-sentient, and to oppose the larger rationalist framework that justifies the commodification and destruction of the earth.

Worse, this dualistic separation between animal/plant, sentient/non-sentient part of the environment runs the risk of perpetuating a denial of (or at least a blindness to) our ecological embeddedness and the part we play in ecological processes. In practice, this distancing of the 'rest' of nature does not help us in being reflexive and critical of our own (sometimes consumerist) behaviours and our ecological footprints as vegans, as evidenced by my story at the start of this paper. Vegans often assume that as long as something does not contain animal products, it is 'cruelty-free' and morally acceptable. Yet that product may still be caught up in systems of exploitation and domination of human and nonhuman Others (think non-fair-trade chocolate, products containing palm oil, non-organic food or imported European vegan cheeses. See also Harper). These processes can and often do involve 'destructive and ecologically unaccountable' behaviours which are at odds with a sustainability and ecological ethics (Plumwood, 'Integrating Ethical Frameworks' 306).

However, and contrary to what Plumwood argues, this does not mean that the problem lies with veganism itself and that it gets disqualified as an ethical and political position; rather it is a particular enactment of it that is problematic as I have just outlined (i.e. an uncritical, unreflexive, dualistic stance that sees veganism as a consumerist lifestyle). On the contrary, I think a form of veganism reframed around less dualistic terms and that recognises our interconnectedness with nonhuman Others (sentient or non-sentient) can be part of the big



rethink Plumwood invites us to do. That is, finding approaches ‘that maximise our sensitivity to other members of our ecological communities and openness to them as ethically considerable beings’ (Plumwood, ‘Integrating Ethical Frameworks’ 301). Veganism as a practice and CAS as a body of literature (weaving theory and praxis) are well placed to do just that because people in these movements have already jumped the species barrier and demonstrated care and compassion for devalued Others/animals, challenging their anthropocentric and ‘carnist’ socialisation (Joy). For many advocates that I have met and certainly for myself, veganism is about reducing suffering and exploitation and taking a stand against unjust socio-economic arrangements. A priori, it should therefore not be difficult to expand our ability to care and take actions for trees, forests, mountains, ecosystems and other earth Others.<sup>14</sup>

At this point, an obvious objection might be anticipated. Asking vegans to consider the moral status of non-sentient parts of the environment is somewhat tragicomic given that so-called ‘plant-sentience’ or ‘plant-consciousness’ is often used in debates by meat-eaters who dismiss veganism on charges of inconsistency. I understand the objection, having been involved in these debates myself, and I am not arguing here that we have exactly the same duties towards plants as towards animals (e.g. that we should never make use of them or eat them), simply that we should not consider it a trivial question. Situating plants or trees within the sphere of ethics and justice is necessary when trying to work out what ethical, sustainable and respectful interactions between humans and the environment should look like (in other words, what an interspecies ethics and ecojustice should look like). For instance, I think there is a justice and ethical issue to be considered when humans cut trees down for development and make tabula rasa, whether it happens on a suburban block in Melbourne or in the tropical rainforest of the Amazon.<sup>15</sup> This does not take away or give any less weight to the fact that we should oppose the exploitation of animals; rather it illuminates another stand in the connected web of oppression, enabling more holistic and effective advocacy.<sup>16</sup>

## Conclusion

As I hope to have demonstrated, ecofeminism has much to offer to the animal advocacy movement, and the work of Val Plumwood in particular is powerful in framing a pluralist, non-reductionist approach to liberation and justice. When examined closely, it also holds up well to

the common critiques made by the Left and some CAS scholars in the sense that it is politically engaged and cognisant of structural issues. Ecofeminism can therefore help reframe animal advocacy in a more political, intersectional fashion and in ways that foreground solidarity and mutuality, recognise nature (not just sentient animals) as a 'centre of needs', 'striving on its own account' and towards its own ends and challenge the grand narrative of mastery and hyperseparation that drives so much of our current issues (Plumwood, *Feminism* 60). Another essential part of this project is to challenge the construction of nonhuman difference as a lack of human characteristics (like reason, speech or sentience) and as the basis for normative hierarchies. Rather than having endless debates about sentience, the practice of veganism needs to centre on a deliberate stance of openness to the Other, to the diversity of sentience, mind, intentionality and even communicative abilities across species, so as to start developing dialogical relationships with nature (Plumwood, *Environmental Culture* 175).

As a way of exemplifying what I mean here, I would like to go back to where I started with food production and veganic gardening. One expression of this new, more inclusive and more ecologically aware version of animal advocacy and veganism would be to strive to make oneself part of ecological processes and feedbacks as much as possible. In the Australian context, growing one's own food is, I think, a good place to start because it is hands-on and rewarding. It may not be as glamorous or seem as radical as the revolution envisaged by social anarchist CAS scholars but I would argue that it is still a political stance, if politics is understood broadly as an 'embodied and performative' practice whose goal is to question existing power relations and to form new 'ecological subjectivities' that embrace our ecological dependencies and limits (Mallory, 'Ecofeminist Political Philosophy' 311–13). Veganic gardening also has the potential of contributing to the theory and praxis of 'possibility' imagined by J.K. Gibson-Graham under postcapitalist politics and of engaging directly with the challenges of species co-existence and ethics of place; it helps us to ask what relations we want to have with the places that support our lives and what an ethics of decolonisation and negotiation might look like in context (Plumwood 2005; Rose). As an ongoing experiment, veganic gardening has brought home what I have tried to express in this paper. Veganism is only the start of the story. It can be much more if we understand it as part of a broader struggle for ecological justice and total liberation, and for developing an alternative future based on respect of difference and cohabitation with Others.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I use the term ‘Other’ broadly and in a similar fashion as Karen Warren who writes ‘reference to “Others” (or other “Others”) is to those who are excluded, marginalised, devalued, pathologised, or naturalised – who become “Others” – in Western systems of unjustified domination-subordination relationships’ (‘The Promise and Power’ xiv). This includes both humans (e.g. women, indigenous people and people of colour, the poor, etc.) and nonhumans (e.g. animals, trees, the land, etc.).

<sup>2</sup> See Gaard for a chronology of the field’s development and backlash against it (‘Ecofeminism Revisited’). Also, whilst some elements of ecofeminism may be considered essentialist and regressive (especially. the kind of cultural ecofeminism that celebrates women’s connection to the earth and equates women and the earth uncritically), I suggest in this paper that ecofeminism is a diverse movement which provides useful tools which can extend critique.

<sup>3</sup> Ecofeminism also looks at the ‘the various ways that sexism, heteronormativity, racism, colonialism, and ableism’ and speciesism are connected for example (Adams and Gruen 1).

<sup>4</sup> Plumwood is careful not to fall into the other extreme and avoids the pitfalls of liberal feminism by rejecting what she called the ‘feminism of uncritical equality’; uncritical equality is usually associated with the idea that women should also be considered rational individual subjects with the same abilities as men and entitled to equal participation in humanity and culture (*Feminism* 27–31). This does not challenge the male dominant culture, it simply tries to fit women into a masculinist mould.

<sup>5</sup> In particular, see Gaard who critiques heterosexism and adds a queer dimension to ecofeminist analysis (‘Toward a Queer Ecofeminism’).

<sup>6</sup> I suggest Plumwood’s famous argument against ‘ontological vegetarianism’ revolves around a misrepresentation of some animal ecofeminists’ work, on the basis of ethnocentrism and universalism (for a rebuttal see Eaton; Twine, ‘Ecofeminism and Veganism’). She also asserts that vegans are against predation or to any animals being ontologised as food – which is not the case in my reading of the literature. Finally, she claims that vegans deny their embeddedness in nature and the web of life by not eating animal products and instead advocates an indigenous-

based approach to food and death, as preying and being preyed upon ('Integrating Ethical Frameworks for Animals' 315; *Eye of the Crocodile* 108). I remain unconvinced by this argument of ecological embeddedness and I think her alternative is not practical or conceivable with Western societies.

<sup>7</sup> Nibert uses the example of the wolf in the US – when the wolf ceased to be an economic threat, its perception by the general public changed and became more positive (*Animal Rights/Human Rights* 14). And conversely, 'when new opportunities for exploitative pursuit of self-interest arise', ideology follows to justify the devaluation of the other group (he gives the example of Jews in Germany as the Other that was targeted by anti-Semitic ideology prior to the second World War) (14).

<sup>8</sup> To some extent, Torres is a little more cautious than Nibert when he writes 'while it is certainly the case that animal exploitation could exist without capitalism, the structure and nature of contemporary capital has deepened, extended, and worsened our domination over animals and the natural world' (11).

<sup>9</sup> Val Plumwood and her husband Richard Routley were not only influential environmental philosophers but also early and committed forest activists (Mathews, Rigby, Rose). Plumwood regularly took position on social and environmental issues (e.g. dingo cull, forest logging, the independence of Timor Leste) and engaged with the doing of environmental ethics (see 'Decolonising Australian Gardens'; *Feminism* 192; 'Fraser Dingo Cull'; 'Shadow Places'; Roelvink and Gibson-Graham).

<sup>10</sup> This is perhaps most obvious when looking at global figures of meat consumption. Despite a growing number of individuals adopting a vegetarian/vegan diet, global meat consumption keeps increasing (World Health Organisation).

<sup>11</sup> By actions, I mean nonviolent civil disobedience as well as more traditional political actions like peaceful protests, political lobbying, etc.

<sup>12</sup> On the issue of animal advocacy and racism see Harper; Kim. On the intersection with sexism see Adams, *The Pornography of Meat*; Deckha, 'Disturbing Images'; Gaarder; Wrenn.

<sup>13</sup> Other reasons why extensionism is problematic includes the fact that the criteria used as the basis for extending moral consideration are always arbitrary and subject to challenge (e.g. the ongoing experiments done on fish to prove whether they can feel pain, see Sneddon). The emphasis on sameness to humans denies the recognition of alterity and diversity as well. Besides, for Plumwood drawing such ‘an abrupt moral and biological break between “animals” and “plants” along the lines of sentience ‘is out of step with what is known about the continuity of planetary life’ (‘Integrating Ethical Frameworks’ 302).

<sup>14</sup> Another ally in re-evaluating nature (and matter more broadly) as having agency and being worthy of ethical consideration can be located in new materialism and specifically feminist materialism (see Alaimo; Alaimo and Hekman). Thanks to the reviewer for bringing this body of literature to my attention.

<sup>15</sup> Activists in Brazil have paid a high price for defending the forests they deeply respect, carefully manage and rely on for survival, see Hill.

<sup>16</sup> One can anticipate similar objections as the ones lodged against other intersectional struggles here, see Kymlicka and Donaldson on this issue.

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