

Seeing the Predator: Review of *The Eye of the Crocodile*, by Val Plumwood; edited by Lorraine Shannon. Acton, ACT: ANU E Press, 2012. <http://press.anu.edu.au/titles/the-eye-of-the-crocodile/>

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In late 2013, the Western Australian Government authorised the culling of sharks over three metres in length, including threatened and endangered species, after experiencing seven fatal shark attacks in the past three years. Despite immense lobbying by the media and animal activist groups, along with large public protests across Australian beaches and through social media, the first shark was killed on Australia Day, 26 January 2014 (ABC News). Watching this debate I find myself reflecting on the core theme of Val Plumwood's book, *The Eye of the Crocodile* (2012), where she argues that humans construct an 'illusionary' division between the human and non-human animal worlds. This division, Plumwood argues, is sustained through rituals and categories which act to maintain the delusion of separateness between these worlds and it is this separation which underpins a capacity for animal cruelty and global destruction. This illusionary division of the natural and human worlds can be clearly seen in the debate around shark culling in Australia where our relationship with these predators is being spoken about in adversarial terms and as if these sharks have become the intruders into 'our' coastal foreshore.

The Eye of the Crocodile is a posthumously published collection of writings by Val Plumwood, Australian ecofeminist and environmental philosopher, edited by Lorraine Shannon. The first section of the book comprises three chapters of an incomplete monograph that Plumwood was working on at the time of her death. This section specifically focuses on the concept and place of human predation and the issues that result when we attempt to create the

illusion of human mastery over nature. The second section comprises two articles (again one is incomplete) that examine the ethico-political basis of human-animal relations, and the third section comprises two previously published papers that advocate an ecological animalism which posits a negotiation or ecological partnership between humans and animals.

In the introduction, written by Freya Mathews, Kate Rigby and Deborah Rose, we learn that Plumwood died from a stroke at the age of 68. These scholars describe how '[h]er stature as a thinker of power and influence was reflected in the fact that she was included in the 2001 book *50 Key Thinkers on the Environment* along with luminaries such as Buddha, Gandhi, and Arne Naess.' (Mathews, Rigby, and Rose, *The Eye of the Crocodile* 1). Born in 1939 and educated as an analytical philosopher at the University of Sydney, Plumwood went on to work as part of a group of philosophers at the Australian National University who developed a radical environmentalism that informed the early environmentalist movement in Australia. She is the author of three books, one co-authored with Richard Routley (now Richard Sylvan), and published over 80 articles. Within the feminist environmental movement and ecofeminism, her groundbreaking work *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (Routledge 1993) became a key text.

In *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* Plumwood outlines the historical role played by rationalism in the establishment of important conceptual dualisms which she argues has causal connections between the domination of women and the domination of nature. Through a focus on the conceptual props which keep the historical dominations of women and nature in place she was able to expose and dismantle dualisms such as reason/emotion, mind/body and culture/nature to argue that whatever has historically been associated with emotion, body, and women is regarded as inferior to that which is associated with reason, mind, culture and men. Thus the challenge, she argues, is to overcome metaphors and models which feminise nature and naturalise women to the mutual detriment of both. In *Environmental Culture* (2002), Plumwood analysed contemporary questions of science, politics, ethics and spirituality, even to ecology itself, arguing for a form of ecological rationality that would replace the dualistic system of rationalism. Reflecting upon this position in *The Eye of the Crocodile*, Plumwood states:

I see human/nature dualism as a failing of my culture, time and history...

Human/nature dualism is a double-sided affair, destroying the bridge between the human and the non-human from both ends, as it were, for just as the essentially human is disembodied, disembedded and discontinuous from the rest of nature, so nature and animals are seen as mindless bodies, excluded from the realms of ethics and culture.

(15-16)

Both the first and second sections of *The Eye of the Crocodile* were written after Plumwood survived a saltwater crocodile attack in February of 1985, and the impact of this experience is clearly embedded within her philosophy. While canoeing alone in Kakadu National Park in the Northern Territory of Australia, she noticed (too late, she writes), that she was being stalked by a saltwater crocodile. She realised her mistake when she saw that the crocodile was looking directly at her as meat, as prey. The crocodile attacked, caught her and death rolled her three times before unexpectedly releasing her. Carrying horrendous injuries to her groin and legs, she managed to make her way through crocodile infested swamps and finally to safety. The first chapter entitled 'Meeting the predator' describes the crocodile attack from the first person perspective (this chapter is a revised version of an article published by the journal *Terra Nova* in 1996, titled 'Being Prey') and identifies Plumwood's sudden realisation as a direct result of the attack, that she had been living in a matrix. 'In that flash' she states, 'when my consciousness had to know the bitter certainty of its end, I glimpsed the world for the first time "from the outside", from outside the narrative of self, where every sentence can start with an "I"' (Plumwood, *The Eye of the Crocodile* 17). She goes on to describe a 'parallel universe' which humans normalise through cultural representations of humanity as belonging to a higher order and thus not a part of the 'normal [natural] universe' (13). In order to naturalise this representation, to render it convincing, Plumwood argues, 'predators of humans have been execrated and largely eliminated' (16) and so the illusion that human beings are not vulnerable prey has been, to a certain extent, made concrete through the extinction of species who were human predators. The remaining two chapters of this section further unpack how it is that humans employ ritualistic practices and semantics in order to create and normalise a culture/nature dualistic illusion that purports to set us apart, above and ultimately out of the natural world.

The style of writing in this first section is predominately a first person narrative and at times verges on the romantic, even florid, which stands in contrast to the remaining chapters which are more formal and analytical. In the introduction, Mathews, Rigby and Rose indicate that Plumwood began to admire creative writers for their ability to convey new ideas and quote her from ‘Journey to the Heart of Stone’ where she states, ‘creative writing can ... play an important part by making visible new possibilities for radically open and non-reductive ways to experience the world.’ (17). The creativity of the writing in this first section most certainly serves this purpose as it communicates the vivid sense that experiencing herself as being ‘seen’ by this crocodile profoundly deepened and embodied what had previously been more theoretical knowledge. As she states, ‘I knew that I was food in the same remote, abstract way that I knew I was animal, was mortal. In the moment of truth, abstract knowledge becomes concrete’ (Plumwood *The Eye of the Crocodile* 10). Attempting to communicate the ‘what it’s like’ of an experience to one who has not shared in a similar experience is indeed a difficult task and Plumwood tackles it well. Although I did not emerge from the reading feeling that I *really* knew what it was like to be attacked by a predator, I did get a clear sense of the profound shift in perspective that had occurred for her. The impact of the realisation that she, too, had been living in the world of human arrogance, a world she had fought to dismantle, was profound. The following passage is, I think, particularly significant:

This was a strong sense, at the moment of being grabbed by those powerful jaws, that there was something profoundly and incredibly wrong in what was happening, some sort of mistaken identity. My disbelief was not just existential but ethical ... The world was not like that! It was a denial of, an insult to all I was to reduce me to food. Were all the other facets of my being to be sacrificed to this utterly indiscriminating use, was my complex organisation to be destroyed so I could be reassembled as part of this other being? With indignation as well as disbelief, I rejected this event. It was an illusion! It was not only unjust but unreal! It couldn’t be happening. (Plumwood, *The Eye of the Crocodile* 11–12)

Plumwood describes the gaze that she exchanged with the crocodile just prior to the attack in intersubjective terms, meaning that she describes the perspective of the crocodile as one which

she could imagine occupying. She states, ‘I have come to understand that the eye of the crocodile, along with the voice of the prey of the crocodile – and one cannot be understood without the other – is also a position to speak from, to think from’ (Plumwood, *The Eye of the Crocodile* 16). In recognising herself in the eye of the crocodile Plumwood recognised the crocodile as occupying a legitimate subject position, as one who looks. Denying the perspective of the non-human animal as subjective, as a position from which we see ourselves, is one of the core conceptual props that has traditionally justified the construction of non-human animals as not warranting ethical consideration. As John Berger points out in *About Looking*, humans look at animals in a variety of ways, but this looking universally lacks the reciprocity of intersubjectivity that language grounds in human encounters such that ‘no animal confirms man ... its lack of common language, its silence, guarantees its distance, its distinctness, its exclusion from and of man’ (Berger 6). In breaking through this barrier, in opening into her own world the position of the eye of the crocodile as one from which to speak and think, Plumwood was not only able to see herself as being seen as meat, but also to *experience* herself, to confirm herself, *as meat*.

This is not to suggest that we should all subject ourselves to near death predator experiences, it is not the jaws of the crocodile that is recommended here but rather the recognition within the *eye* of the ontological reality that we *are* meat with all the terrifying implications that this realisation infers.¹

This is necessary because, as Plumwood identifies, it is the denial of this threat of being meat that has formed a structural component of human estrangement from the environment. Thus, seeing through the eye of the crocodile is a framework for challenging human arrogance. Being reduced to meat is a new way of seeing ourselves as an integrated and unexceptional part of a food chain; a confronting and ontologically terrifying experience. ‘I came to see...,’ she states, ‘It was the world of “normal experience” that was the illusion, and the newly disclosed brute world in which I was prey was, in fact, the unsuspected reality, or at least a crucial part of it’ (Plumwood, *The Eye of the Crocodile* 12). Escaping this reality requires constructing a world where, like in Australia right now, we can justify the culling of threatened and

endangered species of predators in order to attempt to preserve the illusion that being prey is not so.

In the second section of the book, Plumwood shifts from the world of predation to narrate her relationship with Birubi, a wildlife rescue wombat and her reading of the movie *Babe* as a subversive text. The essence of her enquiry in this section is into the possibilities for human and non-human interrelationships. Birubi is the story that I found the most enjoyable, possibly because it challenged my own need to preserve a nature/culture distinction as oppositional. As Birubi ‘grew to belong to both the world of the house and that of the forest’ (Plumwood, *The Eye of the Crocodile* 49), so too did he bring the forest into the house, in the form of leeches, ticks, open doors, chewed timbers, ravished cushions and nocturnal noises. In reading about the devastation to both home and sleep that having a relationship with Birubi involved I found myself wondering how I would cope. I was also reminded of a similar account of a human and non-human relationship that evoked the same challenges, Mark Rowlands’s *The Philosopher and the Wolf* (2008), where Rowlands speaks of his relationship with his companion wolf in similar terms describing an ongoing and oftentimes difficult negotiation that involved house and car destruction.

Donna Haraway’s analysis of the way in which western cultural representations of animals construct and therefore normalise ‘the animals [as existing] just at or over the line into “culture” [and places people] at or over the line into “nature”’ (148) as a strategy that networks their communion is also relevant here. In the Birubi/Plumwood relation this culture/nature dichotomy is blurred rather than preserved, replaced by an ethical and negotiated inter-relationship which has no normative conception. What is negotiated is a space in which the needs of the other are preserved as far as possible. Although Haraway might disagree, I think such a relationship is a far cry from the domesticated pets that we either train to fit into our way of life or else breed so as to promote certain servitude characteristics.

The final section of the book explores Plumwood’s positive thesis of ecological animalism beginning with a critique of what she terms the ‘ontological vegan’ whom she sees as often adopting a ‘holier-than-thou’ attitude in their refusal to eat animal products. This is because for her, ‘ontological veganism insists that neither humans or animals should ever be

conceived as edible or even as usable, confirming the treatment of humans as “outside nature” that is part of human/nature dualism, and blocking any re-conception of animals and humans in fully ecological terms’ (Plumwood, *The Eye of the Crocodile* 78). The theory that she develops ‘is a context-sensitive semi-vegetarian position, which advocates great reductions in first-world meat-eating and opposes reductive and disrespectful conceptions and treatments of animals, especially in factory farming’ (78). Her argument is that to deny animals as a food source is a stance that is not dissimilar to the theists who claim humans are set apart from non-human animals. Ontological veganism, Plumwood concludes, complies with rather than challenges the Cartesian separation of mind and body that has led humanity to the utilitarian use of the environment which has been responsible for immense destruction.

In the final chapter of the book, ‘Tasteless: Towards a food-based approach to death’, Plumwood articulates her non-dualistic view of life, death and eating meat, crediting Australian Indigenous culture as her inspiration. In her ecological animalist framework, dualistic approaches to life, death and food are broken down:

By understanding life as circulation, as a gift from a community of ancestors, we can see death as recycling, a flowing on into an ecological and ancestral community of origins. In place of the Western war of life against death whose battleground has been variously the spirit-identified afterlife and the reduced, medicalised material life, the Indigenous imaginary sees death as part of life, partly through narrative, and partly because death is a return to the (highly narrativised) land that nurtures life. (Plumwood, *The Eye of the Crocodile* 92)

Overall *Eye of the Crocodile* is a fitting tribute to the final work of Val Plumwood whom Mathews, Rigby and Rose describe as ‘a woman who fearlessly lived life on her own deeply considered terms, often in opposition to prevailing norms’ (*The Eye of the Crocodile* 1). She is buried on her namesake property, Plumwood Mountain, in the garden which she established around the stone house that she had built with her own hands. As her friends and colleagues have observed, ‘Even in her death then, she led by her ecological example’ (*The Eye of the Crocodile* 6).

Note

¹ I wish to acknowledge comments made by Dr Fiona Probyn-Rapsey on an earlier draft of this review as informing the need to distinguish the actual crocodile attack as *the way* in which Plumwood gained insight rather than as a means for gaining insight.

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