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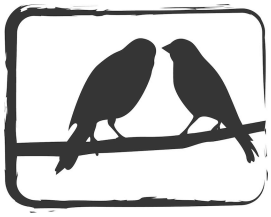

Val Plumwood's Philosophical Animism: attentive interactions in the sentient world

Deborah Bird Rose
Environmental Humanities, University of New South Wales, Australia

ABSTRACT Towards the end of her eventful and productive life, Val Plumwood was turning toward Indigenous people and cultures as a way of encountering the lived experience of ideas she was working with theoretically. At the same time, she was defining herself as a philosophical animist. As I understand her term, she was making connections with animism as a worldview, but rather than mimic or appropriate indigenous animisms she was developing a foundation that could be argued from within western philosophy. Her beautiful definition of philosophical animism is that it "opens the door to a world in which we can begin to negotiate life membership of an ecological community of kindred beings." Thus, her animism, like indigenous animisms, was not a doctrine or orthodoxy, but rather a path, a way of life, a mode of encounter. In the spirit of open-ended encounter, I aim to bring her work into dialogue with some of my Australian Aboriginal teachers. More specifically, I focus on developing an enlarged account of active listening, considering it as the work participants engage in as they inter-act with other sentient creatures. I take a country or place based perspective, engaging with life on the inside of the webs and patterns of connection.

An earlier version of this paper was presented as the Val Plumwood Memorial Lecture at the Minding Animals Conference, held in Newcastle, Australia in July 2009.

Introduction

I treasured Val Plumwood's life and thought, and during the years when we worked together at the Australian National University in the Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies (now part of the Fenner School), we became good colleagues as well as friends. Our commitment was to nurture the environmental humanities as an emerging interdisciplinary field that works across the great binaries of western thought, rethreading the fabric of knowledge across arts and sciences, and across dominant and excluded knowledges. One of the chief aims was to stimulate and sustain the great humanities' project of imagining and working out "new ways to live with the earth."[1]

Val died in 2008, and we gave her a green burial at home on her beloved Plumwood Mountain. As we stood around the open cardboard coffin a large butterfly flew amongst us and

[1] Val Plumwood, "Review of Deborah Bird Rose's *Reports from a Wild Country*," *Australian Humanities Review* 47 (2007).

settled on Val's body. It stayed there long enough for us to feel that the moment was truly significant. Then it took wing and disappeared into the forest. We were awed by the connection between Val, the butterfly and the forest, and many of us felt re-inspired to continue her work in the world. This awesome moment was expressive of much of Val's philosophy. We saw before us the intentionality of other creatures—always mysterious, but never mindless—and we experienced ourselves as creatures who are attentive to others and who are participants in the life of the world.

I begin with a brief account of Val Plumwood's life and thought. My main focus is the philosophical animism she was working with at the time of her death. Many of the ideas that go into her animism had been implicit in her earlier work, but unfortunately no article or essay specifically addresses philosophical animism. I cannot write what she would have written; I seek, therefore, to open a wider dialogue by engaging with her ideas from the perspective of my encounters with Indigenous animism. Specifically, I will take up themes of attentive presence, knowledge and gratitude, and will explore them in the context of Indigenous animism.

A Life of Action

Philosopher, ecofeminist, and activist, Val Plumwood was passionately committed to the understanding that the living world is powerful and possesses its own agency and sentience. She was one of the great intellects of the late 20th century, an eminent Australian environmental philosopher and ecofeminist. Her book *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993) has become a classic.[2] The more recent *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (2002) is becoming a classic too.[3] She is included in the Routledge publication *Fifty Key Thinkers on the Environment*, along with Gandhi, Buddha, and others.[4]

In the 1970s Val and her husband Richard Sylvan (then known as Val and Richard Routley) were key figures in a radical critique of traditional western anthropocentric attitudes and actions. According to the Routleys, these attitudes were the expression of human chauvinism, the belief that only human beings mattered, morally speaking; to the extent that anything else mattered it was only because it was useful for us. Together the Routleys asked the question in a paper published in 1973 that became a call for action that continues today: "Is there a need for a new, an environmental ethic?"[5]

One of Val's key concepts was 'hyperseparation'—the structure of dominance that drives western binaries, including nature/culture, female/male, matter/mind, savage/civilised. The hyperseparation structure accords value to one side of the binary, and relegates the other side to a position of oppositional subordination. As is well known, for example, her work showed how nature was backgrounded vis-a-vis the human, and thus relegated to a role that allowed usefulness without requiring moral considerability. Along with other ecofeminists[6] her

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[2] Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London & New York: Routledge, 1993).

[3] Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (London: Routledge, 2002).

[4] Joy Palmer, *50 Key Thinkers on the Environment* (London: Routledge, 2001).

[5] Richard Routley, "Is there a Need for New, an Environmental, Ethic?" *Sophia* 1 (1973).

[6] See for example, Chaone Mallory, "Val Plumwood and Ecofeminist Political Solidarity: Standing With The Natural Other," *Ethics and the Environment* 14, no. 2 (2009): 3-21; Freya Mathews, *Reinhabiting*

work was pivotal in showing that the same structure also maps onto and subtends gender, class, colonisation, and other social relations. According to the philosopher Freya Mathews, Val's analysis was not the first to address these dualisms, but:

> it was the most comprehensive within the environmental literature. She showed brilliantly how this dualistic system of thought created value hierarchies that systematically rendered inferior all the terms that came to be associated with nature rather than reason: women, the working class, the colonized, the indigenous, as well as the other-than-human world. She thereby demonstrated that the ideology underpinning the domination of nature in the contemporary West is simultaneously an ideology legitimating and naturalizing the domination of many subjugated social groups. The implication was that environmentalism and struggles for social justice cannot be separated out from one another.[7]

Along with her vigorous academic writing, Val was an activist right to the end. The first book she and Richard wrote was *The Fight for the Forest* (1973)—the book that launched the struggle to protect Australia's old growth forests.[8] At the same time, she was living her philosophy. On a mountain near Braidwood in New South Wales, in a wilderness area known as the Budawangs, she and Richard built a house using local stones. Val became Val Plumwood, while Richard took the surname Sylvan. When they divorced, Val stayed on at Plumwood Mountain, caretaking and defending the patch of earth she loved so much.

In the last article she wrote before she died, "Nature in the Active Voice," Val argued that the most challenging task facing the world today is to engage in "a thorough and open rethink which has the courage to question our most basic cultural narratives."[9] Consistent with her life's work, one of the basic narratives she was committed to challenging was the narrative of mind/matter dualism which allocates all mind to humans, and leaves all the rest of the living and non-living world in a state of mindless matter. Against this dualism, she was arguing for an enriched materialism in which matter and mind are mutually informing.

Philosophical Animism

Val had been gaining interest in Indigenous philosophical ecology as the years went on. At the same time, my anthropological research was becoming ever more eco-philosophical. Our converging interests drew us closer together. Val understood that Aboriginal Australians always live within a world that is buzzing with multitudes of sentient beings, only a very few of whom are human. She thought that a good way to start up a major cultural rethink would be to talk with people who are now living within the kinds of understandings we are seeking. She was not planning on appropriating anything: her commitment to cultural change was inextricably linked to her commitment to social justice. Working in a mode of inclusion, she explored the

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Reality: Towards a Recovery of Culture (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005); Ariel Salleh, "Deeper than Deep Ecology: The Eco-feminist Connection," *Environmental Ethics* 6 (1984): 339–46; Karen J. Warren, "The Power and the Promise of Ecological Feminism," *Environmental Ethics* 12, no. 2 (1990): 125-146.

[7] Freya Mathews, "Vale Val," *Environmental Values* 17 (2008): 319.

[8] Most of this information is taken from Freya Mathews's obituary that appeared in *The Guardian*, 26 March, 2008, and can be accessed at: http://valplumwood.com/category/remembering-val-stories-and-obituaries/

[9] Val Plumwood, "Nature in the Active Voice," *Australian Humanities Review* 46 (2009): 113.

significance of Indigenous knowledge today and the kinds of adaptations we would all need to make to engage ethically with contemporary globalised earth systems, including climate change, migration and exchange.[10]

Philosophical animism was Val's term for a stance that would take western peoples into the critical rethink she was calling for. Her understanding of animism was consistent with the basic proposition, articulated succinctly by Graham Harvey: animism rests on the recognition "that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others."[11] The two key points—recognition of personhood beyond humans, and centrality of relationships—are integral both to Indigenous animism and to the kind of rethink Val was calling for. Indeed, the recent reclaiming and positive reframing of the term animism by anthropologists and others is itself a rethink of the sort Val was advocating.

The term animism has its origins in 19th century anthropological work that sought to demonstrate an evolutionary hierarchy within the human family such that primitives could be defined in ways that radically distinguished them from civilised folk. It was, in short, another structure marked by hyperseparated dualism, and one of the distinguishing criteria for making the cut between 'us' and 'them' was animism. According to Edward Tylor, a foundational figure in the earlier use of the term, primitive people imagined that everything had within it a soul. As a secular thinker and materialist, Tylor argued that primitives failed to understand the absolute differences between humans and all others. According to Harvey, Tylor asserted that "animists have no sense of the 'absolute psychical distinction between man and beast' or between humanity and plants or even 'objects.'"[12] His words indicate the pervasiveness of the binaries; he equates recognition of hyperseparated boundaries with civilisation, and thus he uses hyperseparation ideology to denigrate and dismiss Indigenous knowledge.

The radical rethink of the term animism has been advanced by evidence arriving on three major fronts: scientific, philosophical and anthropological. I will return to the anthropological front shortly, as it is an area where my own work has contributed, but I want briefly to mention science and philosophy. To the best of my knowledge, scientists have not sought to engage in an argument about animism. On the other hand, there has been outstanding research in the area of nonhuman sentience. Even where the research has had an anthropocentric bias, asking to what extent animal thinking and communicating is similar to that of humans, the results have been spectacular. Research that remains situated within an anthropocentric frame of inquiry does not radically destabilise the human/nonhuman binary. It extends the domain of sentience by using the human as the measure, and then finds that some others also conform to the human-based criteria. The approach is massively limited; indeed, as the philosopher Christian Diehm argues, an anthropocentric approach actually disables all manner of human experience and knowledge in relation to nonhumans.[13]

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[10] See for example, Val Plumwood, "Shadow Places and the Politics of Dwelling," *Australian Humanities Review* 44 (2008): 139-150.

[11] Graham Harvey, *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), xi.

[12] Ibid., 7-8.

[13] Christian Diehm, "Staying True to Trees: A Specific Look at Anthropocentrism and Non-Anthropocentrism," *Environmental Philosophy* 5, no. 2 (2008): 3-16.

Far more interesting is the research of ethologists who ask questions that are both more simple and more complex: do animals (for example) experience an emotional life? Do animals have a sense of morality and justice? Do they experience empathy? Marc Bekoff is an outstanding figure in this area, and his work is the visible tip of a large and fascinating iceberg.[14] And yet, even when we consider life forms whose way of life is vastly different from humans, we find a growing sense of their intelligence and intentionality. Biochemist Daniel Koshland discusses the life of desire experienced by bacteria:

> 'Choice', 'discrimination', 'memory', 'learning', 'instinct', 'judgement', and 'adaptation' are words we normally identify with higher neural processes. Yet, in a sense, a bacterium can be said to have each of these properties.[15]

None of this work tells us how we should engage with nonhumans once we accept that they are not mindless brutes or stimulus-response machines. It does tell us, however, that the hyperseparated dualism that would claim that there are no relevant continuities between the minds of humans and the minds of other living beings is not founded in evidence. To the contrary, evidence across many life forms including plants,[16] is increasingly indicating the widespread, possibly universal, existence of sentience and agency.

Val was a significant thinker in philosophical debates about ethical relationships between humans and nonhumans not only for what she offered, but for how she side-stepped many approaches that may be defensible through logic but that do not lead us into ways of opening ourselves to an ethical involvement with our earth others. Her aim was to open ethics for action, not to offer further iterations of abstract analysis of the logic of ethics.

Most of her argument was laid out extensively in *Environmental Culture*. Here she put forward an interspecies ethic of recognition which depended on a particular stance toward the nonhuman world. That is, she was not making a set of truth claims about the world, but rather was asking what kind of stance a human can take that will open her to a responsive engagement in relation to nonhuman others. Her answer was that to recognise "earth others as fellow agents and narrative subjects is crucial for all ethical, collaborative, communicative and mutualistic projects, as well as for place sensitivity."[17] One effect of opening one's self, as human, would be to dispel the myth of mindlessness, not through a logical account of mind, but through the experience of being one amongst many in a world already replete with mindfulness. In opening one's self to others as communicative beings, one places one's self in a position of being able to experience communication. She saw this as a step toward a post-

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[14] Marc Bekoff, *Minding Animals: Awareness, Emotions, and Heart* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Marc Bekoff and Jessica Pierce, *Wild Justice: The Moral Lives of Animals* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

[15] Quoted in Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan, *What Is Life?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 219.

[16] Matthew Hall, *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011).

[17] Plumwood, *Environmental Culture*, 176.

Cartesian reconstruction of mind.[18] It would recognise intentionality, and it would include communication, exchange, and agency.[19]

One of the things that is so remarkable about Val's approach to ethics is that it avoids all those abstract questions of who or what is morally considerable, and what may be meant by that. Rather than querying others, it asks the human to query herself, and it seeks to open the human to the experience of others in the contexts of their own communicative and expressive lives. Here, as elsewhere, she was concerned with paths (toward others) rather than answers (about others). An approach that starts with recognition of expression is a 'gateway' through which we can find ourselves encountering the force of the fact "that the larger-than-human world counts for something in its own terms as well as in terms of our relationship to it."[20]

This gateway (or 'door' as she described it in her definition of what philosophical animism does), entails interspecies communication.[21] Here again, she is not defining communication in strictly human terms; there is no suggestion that other creatures sit around debating philosophy, but she is asserting that as other creatures live their lives, so they communicate aspects of themselves. Amidst all this communication, one finds one's self encountering expressiveness and mindfulness within the world of life.[22] And amidst all this mindfulness, there arises a dialogical concept of self for both the human and for others.[23]

In sum, Plumwood's philosophical animism "opens the door to a world in which we can begin to negotiate life membership of an ecological community of kindred beings."[24] Her use of the term 'kindred' means beings with whom we are kin; she was claiming an earth kindred, or kinship amongst those she called earth others. We tend to think of kinfolk as organic beings, but Val was open even to thinking about kinship with stones and other inorganic 'beings.'[25]

Indigenous animism

Anthropologists have been vigorously rethinking animism, and are offering analysis that engages with Indigenous people's own accounts of personhood (rather than, like Tylor, imposing an external framework of analysis upon them). This new animism finds its starting point in the work of the anthropologist Hallowell, whose 1960 account of Ojibwa personhood made the perspicacious point that Ojibwa concepts of personhood did not start with the human and extend outward to the world, but rather started with a wide category of 'persons,' one sub-group of which were humans. In Ojibwa ontology, there are numerous kinds of persons—stone persons, bear persons, and many more.[26] The basic points that Hallowell put

[18] Plumwood, *Environmental Culture*, 176.

[19] Ibid., 181.

[20] Ibid., 186.

[21] Ibid., 189.

[22] Ibid., 192.

[23] Ibid., 195.

[24] Plumwood, "Nature in the Active Voice," 121.

[25] See for example, Val Plumwood "Journey to the Heart of Stone," in *Culture, Creativity and Environment: New Environmentalist Criticism*, ed. Fiona Becket and Terry Gifford (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007): 17-35.

[26] Summarised in Harvey, *Animism*, 18.

forward have since been found to be widespread amongst Indigenous people: that humans are one kind of person among many, that persons (of all types) are wilful, interactive, sociable and communicative, and that one of the aims of a human life is to learn over the course of a lifetime to understand and respect nonhuman persons and their ways of life.

On-going research by anthropologists, philosophers and others is showing that to decentre the human as the privileged source of mindfulness in the world is to radically overturn much of how we in the west have understood the world.[27] Harvey points to Val Plumwood's essay "Being Prey" in which she discusses her experience of being taken by a crocodile (discussed in greater detail below) as a key text for vividly illuminating the understanding that nonhumans "have a point of view" and that it is not necessarily, or even likely, to be one that privileges humans.[28] To be a member of a wider community of persons, and to understand that fact, is a humbling experience, to say the least. And at the same time, it is an enriching experience. In turning toward nonhumans with openness toward the unexpected (a necessary attitude given that they are not inert), the human person holds herself available and attentive to the worlds and multifarious 'voices' of others.

One of the Australian Aboriginal people who taught me was an Elder named Steve Meredith, a Ngiyampaa man whose country is in western New South Wales. In his words:

> What happens is because the fellow went to school, for birds, they're a bird expert, and then you get somebody went to school, they're a plant expert. And the birds eat the plants, which is related to the soil which is related to the water which is related—that all interacts with the people, but they never seem to look at it that way. So that's why we say they pigeonhole things.
>
> Whereas, the funny thing about it is, they pigeonhole all these things, and because they went to school [they think] they're higher than all that, they're above nature, and they tend to look down and study nature, like it's ants on the ground. But when you fall asleep, eh, them ants they'll crawl all over you. They'll bite you, or sometimes they don't, but them ants might be carrying out their research then, on you. But either way you look at it, you can't be separate from it …[29]

This ecologically sparked-up animist thinking works with a logic of connection: it asserts relations of mutual inter-action, and tells us that humans are not only acting upon the world, but that others are also taking notice and acting upon humans.

Creature communities

I turn now to a more detailed discussion of Australian Indigenous animism. In 1980 I began my ethnographic research with Australian Aboriginal people in the Victoria River region of the Northern Territory of Australia, and that research is on-going. It led me from philosophical questions about the meaning of life and death to a study of ecological knowledge, for it

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[27] See for example J.K. Gibson-Graham and Gerda Roelvink "An Economic Ethics for the Anthropocene," *Antipode* 41, no. S1 (2009): 320–346.

[28] Ibid., 27-28.

[29] Deborah Rose, *Sharing Kinship with Nature: How Reconciliation is Transforming the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service* (Sydney: National Parks and Wildlife Service, NSW, 2003): 98-99.

became clear to me that the answers to many of the questions I was asking are located dialogically within the world of living beings.

Communication and intelligence are integral to the flow of life in the world, using the term intelligence in its standard everyday meaning of "capacity for learning, reasoning, understanding." Most of the Elders who taught me have used another term that is more inclusive: they speak of culture, and they vigorously assert that culture is a specific way of being in the world. It follows that nonhuman beings have, and live by, culture. The evidence of life in action shows us that other beings have and follow their own ways. They have their own foods, foraging methods, forms of sociality and seasonality; they have their own languages and their own ceremonies. According to one Elder: "birds got ceremony of their own—brolga, turkey, crow, hawk, white and black cockatoo—all got ceremony, women's side, men's side, ... everything." Plants as well as animals are sentient, and, according to many Aboriginal people, the earth itself has culture and power within it. In this line of thought, we are *all* culture-creatures. We are intelligent, we act with purpose, we communicate and take notice, we participate in a world of multiple purposes. It is a multi-cultural world from inside the earth right on through.[30]

This generalisation is localised. Australian Aboriginal people have picked up the word 'country' and remade it into a powerful signifier of local, multispecies belonging. In Indigenous country there is no nature/culture divide. One could say that country is all culture, but the more interesting point is that it is all sentient, communicative, relational and inter-active. In this sense, culture is not something you have, but rather is the way you live, and by implication, the way your knowledge arises and is worked with. Country is both the context of life and the emergent result of life being lived. Country exists because of the living beings who participate in the life of country, and country flourishes through looped and tangled relationships. Country has a past, a present and a future, it gives and receives life.[31] It is a matrix of communicative inter-action, a system of connectivities and benefits, a home on earth. Furthermore, there is no actual outside of the system of countries: beyond this country is another one, beyond that another one. You can run, but you never get outside of country. This means that there is no outside place of knowledge, and no outside place where one is exempt from participation. All knowledge is "situated," to use the feminist term,[32] and country is an entangled matrix of multispecies situatedness.

A further consequence of situated knowledge amongst sentient beings is that knowledge is relational. To live in a world of sentience is to be surrounded by others who are also sentient. I will consider some of the consequences of situated, relational knowledge through a conversation I had with another Elder, Snowy Kulmilya, a terrific hunter and a

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[30] Kohn uses the term 'multinaturalist' to arrive at similar analysis, based on his research in Amazonia (Kohn 2007).

[31] Many Aboriginal people include certain rivers, waterholes and other landforms within the domain of living beings. My purpose in this paper does not hinge on what is or is not included within the category of living being; my focus is on the point that living beings (however defined) are sentient and agentive.

[32] See for example, Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575-599.

fascinating story-teller. On one occasion he got talking about how to hunt echidnas (*Tachyglossus aculeatus)*, also known as porcupine, or, in Ngarinman language, which was Snowy's native tongue, *junkuwuru*. In the following passage I have changed his English slightly to bring it more in line with standard English, but I have kept his dialogical storytelling style.

> Snowy: When they want to go hunting porcupine, night time, they can't talk like that, can't talk "I'm going hunting *junkuwuru*." They can't. You can't call him name, you can't find him then. When you go hunting night time, you can't findem porcupine. Porcupine might be gone bush somewhere. Inside the cave.
>
> Debbie: So what do you have to do?
>
> Snowy: You just gotta talk, oh I'm going walkabout *kirinjin*, they call him. *Kirinjin*.
>
> Debbie: *Kirinjin*?
>
> Snowy: *Kirinjin*, that's that name now, porcupine hunting. They know. And they talk '*kirinjin'*. You can't talk *junkuwuru*. You frighten him. That's different, eh? They call out to each other: "what there old man?" "I go *kirinjin*, this one." We go at night, you know. Full night time, you know.
>
> Debbie: A bit tricky?
>
> Snowy: Tricky, yeah. Well porcupine he's tricky too, I think. Might be, I don't know. I don't know how he does it.

Snowy's story tells us that there are many active intelligences out there paying attention. Indeed, within a context of hunting, killing and eating, creature-culture intelligence can be highly charged. Here is Kathy Deveraux, an Aboriginal woman from the floodplains southwest of Darwin, telling about what it takes to be a great hunter:

> An exceptional good hunter-gatherer is known to have *milityin* powers. They are regarded highly for their hunting prowess in providing food for the camp. A *milityin* rarely comes back empty handed. ... the *milityin* may not only have to consider where a barramundi or long-neck turtle may be resting in the middle of a hot day, but must take extra precautions for the big crocodile who regularly cruises up and down his territory. A *milityin* has to out-think and out-smart them all.[33]

The term *milityin* is not gender-specific. Kathy was an outstanding *milityin*, and she spoke from years of personal experience when she described watching out for the big crocodile who cruises up and down his territory.

Val Plumwood had the experience of actually being taken by a crocodile. While canoeing in Kakadu National Park during the season when crocodiles become territorial, she was attacked and taken into the death roll three times before escaping up the river bank.

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[33] Quoted in Deborah Rose, *Country of the Heart: An Indigenous Australian Homeland*. 2nd ed. (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2011): 56.

Wounded and bleeding, she crawled for hours trying to reach the ranger station, and was finally rescued and rushed to hospital. This experience had a formative impact on her understanding of being a creature in a world in which other creatures have their own intelligence and objectives:

> Some of the minds we encounter ... tell us things we need to know ... They include ... canny animals who gaze back, size you up and tell you who you are ... and where you get off. To stay alive and reproduce they have to—and to all but the most reduction-blinded observer patently do—think ahead, try to outsmart you, work out how to escape your reach, and fool you with successful attempts to distract your attention.[34]

Active Attention

In western thought, the active voice is the speaking voice. Val targeted for critique our western arrogance in imagining that we are the only creatures who speak, and thus the only ones who possess the active voice.[35] Her argument pointed to another aspect of the nature/culture binary, one that has positioned humans as expressive agents (active) and to position nonhumans as those with nothing to express (passive). Her purpose was to open the idea of nature's own expressive voice. One of the problems, of course, has been that of equating communication, or expression, with language. Patrick Curry, reminds us that the problem of conflating communication with language throws us back into a human-centric enclosure. In his words:

> Nature is not 'mute'. It is eloquent: discursively structured and therefore meaningful throughout, saturated with messages and stories, and without any stuff (energy), so far as we shall ever know, that is unpatterned—all of which includes, but vastly exceeds, both us and our language, the latter itself a subset of our own discursivity. Meanings and values 'are not "outside" nature, but have always been integral to its constitution.' And human participation is not an optional extra; it is entailed by being alive.[36]

As David Abram and others have shown, to the extent that we western people regard expression as the major form of active communication, we may be ill-prepared to consider listening as another, equally important, form of active engagement.[37] The backgrounding of listening (receiving information) is also part of the structure of hyperseparated dualisms: to speak is the human prerogative (because we have language), it is the active mode of being; listening (or being spoken to) is the passive or recipient position. The power relation is clearly hierarchical: those who speak are more powerful than those who are spoken to.

I am proposing that listening, and more broadly, paying attention, should also be considered an active verb; indeed in multispecies creature communities, it must be so considered. To pay attention is to exercise intelligence, to know so as to be able to inter-act. 'Inter-action' denotes action undertaken in a participatory field of actors all or many of whom

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[34] Plumwood, *Environmental Culture*, 177.

[35] Plumwood, "Nature in the Active Voice."

[36] Patrick Curry, "Nature Post-nature," *New Formations* 64 (2008): 59.

[37] David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996).

are actively paying attention. I am specifically concerned with multispecies, multi-cultural zones of inter-action. We are in such zones all the time, of course: this is part of the meaning, the beauty, and the peril of being alive. But the mind/matter binary leads us to neglect, perhaps even deny, the knowledge that we humans, too, are being observed, are "part of the feast" as Val so vividly described it.[38]

Consider the crocodile: its silent and concealed attentiveness is very far from passive! Often it exercises its intelligence precisely by paying attention without drawing attention. Good hunters (nonhumans and humans) do this: they know others are paying attention, they know the ways in which others pay attention, and they find ways to circumvent that attention. The exercise of agency calls for both communication and attention; one is not so much an actor as an inter-actor or participant. Let us think that to participate is to be attentive, to be knowledgeable, to act on knowledge, or to refrain from acting (which is also a form of intelligence). Snowy was explaining all this in relation to porcupines: part of what makes porcupines intelligent and hard to hunt is that they are actively paying attention, actively knowing what is going on in their world, and inter-acting on the basis of that knowledge. Successful inter-action, for an echidna who is being hunted, is to elude the hunter. That too, that capacity to remain hidden, is a form of action.

Another facet of communication is that the world is full of what the Elders who taught me called 'tellers.' Tellers are those who provide information: they give news of what is happening in the world. A few examples will convey the sense of tellers:

- When the march flies bite, the crocodiles are laying their eggs.
- When the jangarla tree (*Sesbania Formosa*) flowers, the barramundi are biting.
- When the cicadas sing, the figs are ripe and the turtles are fat.
- A type of swift flies high in the air before the cold weather begins, but comes down to make its nest and stay at the lower altitudes during the cold weather.
- When the fireflies come, the conkerberries (*Carissa lanceolata*) are ripe.

This communicative system depends on knowledge, and is highly localised. March flies, for example, start biting across a wide area, but the meaning of that bite varies from one locale to the next.[39] The system opens the human sensorium, extending it through attentiveness to others: jangarla trees tell what is going on under water where humans cannot stay for long; swifts tell what is happening in the upper atmosphere; march flies tell what is happening along the banks of billabongs and rivers, whether people are there or not. For humans and others to gain knowledge from tellers, therefore, they must pay active attention.

All these tellings can be thought of as languages. Following Peter Boyle's inspired phrase, I am inclined to call them creature-languages: the multiple languages of the complex

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[38] Val Plumwood, "Prey to a Crocodile," *Aisling Magazine* (n.d.). I am using the term inter-action in an epistemological sense. It is not intended to contradict Barad's ontological work on 'intra-action.' Rather, I see the two terms as complementary. See Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," *Signs* 28, no. 3 (2003): 801-831.

[39] Discussed in Deborah Rose "An Indigenous Philosophical Ecology: Situating the Human," *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 16, no. 3 (2005): 294-305.

living world.[40] Creature-languages draw the full sensorium into the communicative matrix of country. The sight and smell of flowers, the pain of the march fly bite and the sensation of blood running down the leg, the sight of swifts in the sky or flower petals drifting in the river, fireflies winking and the interminable racket of cicadas: these are multi-faceted creature-languages, and smart creatures take notice. Humans enhance their intelligence not by stepping out of the system and trying to control it, but by enmeshing themselves ever more knowledgeably into the creature-languages of country.

A significant aspect of the knowledge system based in country and made up of many participants is that no one knows everything. Snowy Kulmilya expressed this in his discussion of hunting echidnas. His 'I don't know' is fundamental to being a participant in country. To be on the inside is to know that one's knowledge does not encompass all the others; to know that country exceeds the knowing of any given knower or any given type of knower. In contrast to a human-centric understanding of knowledge that would see a lack of human knowledge as an epistemological gap waiting to be filled, in creature communities knowledge is widely and patchily distributed. There is a multiplicity of perspectives and knowledges, and there is no privileged perspective. Where one person's or species' knowledge stops, someone else's knowledge picks up the story.

Attention on the Inside

One of the many interesting things about creature languages is that they do not always require an audience: march flies will do what they will do whether anyone is paying attention or not, and so will swifts and cicadas and many others. Their way of living is communicative, but it is not necessarily targeted at anyone in particular. This thought is helpful to westerners, I think, as many of us may find ourselves embarrassed at the thought that country might really be addressing us in particular. For my part, I have from time to time encountered real discomfort around the idea that any nonhuman being really gives a darn about me and my projects, outside of the obvious contexts of, say, hunting—as predator and as prey. However, the corollary to the idea of nobody giving a darn would be that what I do doesn't matter, and that is clearly not true. Certainly, we do not get off so lightly in Indigenous thought: while march flies may not be telling *us* to dig croc eggs, any more than they may be telling *crocs* to lay their eggs, those who understand the teller and act on the message, are putting themselves into the story. They are interacting with the patterns of country, and so they too become part of the patterns. And if there is information, and if the person does respond, then there is a patterned relationship that can be, and often is, described in its particularity in ways that can be understood as targeted. To go back to an earlier story, ants probably do not care deeply about Deborah Rose, but I can assert that they have carried out inordinately intrusive research on me. I have my ant stories, and for a while there, when I was targeted for intense investigation, they were clearly communicating something amongst themselves concerning the apparently fascinating terrain of my swag and my flesh. The inter-action disturbed me, and seemed to stimulate them. We were certainly co-present in our conflicting desires, and the words with which I addressed them are best imagined rather than published.

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[40] Peter Boyle "Travelling in a Caravan," *Australian Humanities Review* 39-40 (2006).

One of my most interesting teachers was Old Jimmy Manngaiyarri. He lived well into his nineties, had walked through huge stretches of country, and had a magnificent memory. In one of our long conversations he tried to tell me about how the earth itself communicates. The conversation took place not long after we had made a trip to a place called Neave Gorge, south of Daguragu, an Aboriginal community along the Victoria River in the Northern Territory. During the course of the trip we had a couple of flat tires, and got into an area of washaways that were difficult and increasingly dangerous. Good judgement suggested that we turn back. In a subsequent conversation Jimmy used the words mind and memory interchangeably in his effort to get me to understand that our decision had a story:

> Jimmy: That's what this earth makes you to do. Makes you go this way. Or you go up here. You get up first thing in the morning, when you camp you get up first thing in the morning, and you go. That's the word earth give you—whatever way you go, see?
>
> Debbie: If earth is trying to tell you, do you hear that with your ear?
>
> Jimmy: You got to think! Well, this earth must be tell you: "Ah, go this way." Well, you must be go that way. Well, you must be good. You go up that way.
>
> Debbie: How does it tell you?
>
> Jimmy: On your mind. Earth got to tell you all thing. Might be say: "Ah, you leave me. What for you go away? You go over there, you get hurt." You got to go only what this earth tell you to. Where you going to go, you going to go right way. That's the way you got to follow this earth. Tell you everything right way. Right way to go, see?
>
> Debbie: How?
>
> Jimmy: You and me went down to Neave Gorge. And come back straight away. That's nobody been tell you and me to do that? This earth tell you! In your memory. Well that's the way. You and me can't miss. Do it properly, looking after ourselves. Do the right thing. This earth understand EVERYthing. Think on your memory now! You got that word from this earth.

"You got that word," Old Jimmy tells us, but this language, which seems to give guidance as to how to be a good and safe person, remains elusive. Goodness involves being responsive to what earth says, but Old Jimmy brings me to a frustrating limit—not of ethics but of epistemology. How do we learn the attention that would enable us to admit earth 'words' into our lives? It seems that if communication is to occur, people have to learn to understand many, many other creatures, paying attention, for example to the multitude of creature-languages—the sounds, smells, and behaviour, the flowering trees, the seasons, and the comings and goings of birds, insects and other creatures, and the silences too. In Old Jimmy's explanation, it seems one also has to be attentive to one's own experience, to regard the living of life itself as always communicative. Life on the inside of country includes one's self, and thus one's own experience is communicative, too. The work of a lifetime is a never-completed project of participatory goodness, in which goodness means paying attention and acting properly.

Gratitude

Val spoke and wrote about a materialist spirituality, a core feature of which was gratitude. Her spirituality emerges from recognition of the elements and beings that support and nourish our lives, and is articulated through the mutual life giving between humans and the nonhuman world. Mutual life giving is the basis of ecological emplacement. She was mindful of the words of Native Americans who keep honour and respect in the heart of spirituality.[41] She found courage and wisdom in Australian Aboriginal concepts of belonging, and drew on the words of Big Bill Neidjie (1989) of Arnhem Land (Northern Territory) in an article published just a month or so after she died.[42]

He said: "You got to hang onto this story because the earth, *this ground, earth where you brought up, this earth he grow you*," and he repeats the point elsewhere: "*This piece of ground he grow you*."[43] Val remarks that "this piece of ground that grows you (in the same way … as it grows a plant or a tree)" reflects a view in which country is "an active agent in and co-constituter of our lives," along with the view that growing something or someone up is "a process in which the energy of others is actively invested."[44]

Her understanding of the material world as a mindful place made up of interactions amongst many mindful beings seemed to pose a communicative challenge for her, and was directly related to her conviction that "the real meaning of ecological literacy" is the development of "stories that create much greater transparency of these [inter-active] relationships in our day-to-day lives." She was arguing that we of the west must once again become "a culture of stories—stories that link our lives with the Great Life which some call Gaia, but all should call by names of their own devising."[45] She ended up calling for philosophy to "converge with much of poetry and literature" because poetry and literature have better methods for "making room" for understanding the vivid presence of mindful life on earth.[46] The quest for poetic forms of writing articulates her understanding that inside a world of dynamic inter-action, knowledge arises through participation; to "make room" for others, one needs to do more than represent. Somehow, one needs to vivify, to leap across imaginative realms, to connect, to empathise, to be addressed and to be brought into gratitude.

Poetry may be particularly suited to communicating experiences from 'inside' the world of country. Peter Boyle, for example, makes a contrast between reporting languages and poetry. Poetry, he says, "reports no information, delivers no instructions." It moves on a plane that has no space for the manipulation of others—"there is no room for lying." Primarily, he writes, poetry (and music) "do not tell us about things—they place us inside them." Poetry thus calls

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[41] Val Plumwood, "Place, Politics, and Spirituality," in *Pagan Visions for a Sustainable Future*, ed. Ly de Angeles, Emma Restall Orr and Thom van Dooren (Woodbury, MN: Llewellyn, 2005): 237.

[42] Bill Neidjie, *Story about Feeling* (Broome: Magabala Books, 1989).

[43] Neidjie (1989, 166 and 61, respectively). Neidjie uses the pronoun 'he' in the manner of Aboriginal colloquial English as a generic term for he, she and it. Elsewhere he refers to earth as 'mother.'

[44] Plumwood, "Shadow Places," 145.

[45] Val Plumwood *The Eye of the Crocodile*, ed. Lorraine Shannon (Canberra: ANU E-press, 2012): 44.

[46] Val Plumwood, "Nature in the Active Voice," *Australian Humanities Review* 46 (2009): 125.

forth an attentiveness through which it is "capable not merely of mirroring our perceptions of the world—as everyday language does—but of delivering new perceptions, new realities."[47]

In pursuit of an expanded communicative repertoire, Val was writing stories as well as philosophy. Her "Journey to the Heart of Stone," for example, starts with the claim that "creative writing can also play an important part by making visible new possibilities for radically open and non-reductive ways to experience the world."[48] She was able to communicate radically open ways of experiencing the world because she herself had had such experiences. She once told us a story about something she encountered when walking along the edge of a wooded area and hearing some birds singing sweetly. When she glanced up she saw that they were crows. The instant they saw her noticing them, their voices changed into the familiar raspy crow register. Peter Boyle wrote a prose poem about this event:

> Crow:
> The sound of crows is known to us for its mournfulness, its insistent black edge to a bright world. There was a day when she stepped into a clearing and surprised crows at their other speech, the cheerful joyous rapture they know from time to time when no one is about, when they are completely free of all other creatures' expectations. It did not last long, less than a minute before the crows perceived her startled presence. In that minute how taken home she felt to the world's deep joy.
>
> Coda:
> Or perhaps as a girl what had happened was this: for one moment she became a crow and heard crows the way crows hear themselves. Nothing has changed in the singing of the crows, the same pitches and frequencies spliced against a clearing in sunlight. Only for this one time her ears, her entire being perceived these sounds according to the delicate inner coding of a crow. Just like the small brown and grey birds, so drab to our eyes, that to each other are splashes of the brightest iridescent colour, so, through a strange grace, she had perceived that day for those few moments as a crow does, had grasped their smooth eloquent harmonies gliding between the interrupted stuttering of the trees.[49]

Earth language is never monological; always relational, it is a call to enter into encounters, to be co-present and engaged. We know that nonhumans communicate in multiple registers, and perhaps it is necessary, therefore, to be able to listen in multiple registers. Surely there must be on-going inter-action, and surely the stories we tell must be woven with the stories we acknowledge others to be telling? Living things, including humans, are expressive, and if we take Old Jimmy at his word even if we do not fully understand it, the earth speaks too. Like the butterfly that came and rested in Val's coffin, the communicative life of earth keeps us in its ken.

Perhaps it seems like magic, this butterfly, or perhaps like some amazing coincidence, but it is neither. In a sentient world, the world speaks.

Its great story is that it speaks, and our great story is that we are part of its speaking.

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[47] Peter Boyle, "Music and Poetry: A Personal Encounter," Struga: Struga Poetry Evenings, International Poetry Festival (2009).

[48] Plumwood, "Journey," 17.

[49] Peter Boyle, "Crows," *Southerly* 70, no. 1 (2010).

Professor Deborah Bird Rose, Environmental Humanities Program, University of New South Wales, is a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia, and a founding co-editor of *Environmental Humanities*. Recent books include *Wild Dog Dreaming: Love and Extinction* (2011, University of Virginia Press), the re-released second edition of *Country of the Heart: An Indigenous Australian Homeland* (2011), and the third edition of the prize-winning ethnography *Dingo Makes Us Human* (2009).

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