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Plumwood[i]

Zoë Coombe[ii]

The plumwood (Eucryphia moorei) is a tree that captures. Germinating in protected organic matter on top of the soft tree fern (Dicksonia antarctica), the plumwood seedling entangles the fern, growing thick aerial roots around its trunk and down to the forest floor. The plumwood's binding roots do not kill the fern; the plants grow together, in some cases over hundreds of years, taking on a form shaped by the ongoing negotiations of their intertwined existences. Beyond this intimate attachment with the fern, the plumwood tree also offers stories of entanglement over longer times and greater distances. The plumwood belongs to the genus Eucryphia, a group of Gondwana remnant plants that grew apart after the breakup of the supercontinent some 170-180 million years ago and now has a limited distribution through Australia and South America.[1] In the misty, Gondwana-like microclimates that form as ocean winds meet mountain ranges, the remaining pockets of plumwood rainforest on Australia's eastern coast bring some of these well-hidden stories and relations across time and space into clearer view.

The house and the grave of the feminist environmental philosopher Val Plumwood lies in violently settled and unceded Yuin country, in a small clearing of Eucryphia rainforest on the New South Wales (NSW) southern coastal escarpment.[2] Taking her surname from the Eucryphia moorei, Val Plumwood's capture with this tree not only expresses a personal attachment to the place she called home, but also speaks to her enduring political and philosophical concern in matters of shared knowledge and existence - human and otherwise. Bringing forward the power relations shaping attachments to a homeplace, and highlighting the political and ethical limitations of place knowledge and place attachment discourses emerging in environmental theory, Plumwood's notion of shadow places offers an approach to finding paths connecting domestic or internal spaces with longer passages of colonialism, capitalism and empire.

From the King's Highway, the state route which connects Canberra with Batemans Bay, a long dirt track takes visitors to a place now known as Plumwood Mountain. It passes through the understory of a eucalypt forest, past rusting cars and mining debris along the creeks and gullies, and up into the rainforest where Val and Richard Routley (who, after their divorce, would take the surnames Plumwood and Sylvan, respectively) built their home. Settlers first arrived in the area in the early 1800s, following the decision in 1785 to establish a penal colony in NSW, and the subsequent invasion by a fleet of Royal Navy ships, convict transports and storage vessels in Kamay (Botany Bay) in 1788. Historical records describe widespread land clearing and the introduction of sheep and cattle - work possible only

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[1] Clokie, "Molecular Studies."
[2] Nadijwoji, "Stories of the Country," 28.

through forced convict and Aboriginal labour. [3] The discovery of gold brought settlers into the mountains and valleys.

As a philosopher trained in logic and living in a forest, Plumwood maintained a strong commitment to complex but legible relations. Inside her home, bookshelves line the walls. Textbooks on Australian rainforests and geology, topographical maps, field guides for birds, plants, mammals, reptiles and fungi sit alongside texts in philosophy, history, feminism and political theory, giving a sense of the many lenses through which Plumwood approached her work. She believed that a close association with place could help to bring forth relations and dependencies denied within capitalist and colonial logic, fostering a deeper understanding of the "narratives and narrative subjects" that "define and elaborate" a place; the human and more-than-human subjects and labours - including the labours of "earth processes"- that support its dynamics and life.[4] While she understood place knowledge and sensitivity to be an important dimension of ecological awareness, she suggested that "unified, innocent and singularistic" place attachments such as those put forward by bioregionalists (and Nazis) erase and deny histories, relations and power dynamics, securing the place of the powerful while further marginalising the "denied, dislocated and dispossessed."[5] In the context of Australian settler colonialism, she argued, that singular, special place attachments often misappropriate Indigenous spiritual connections to country, serving settler claims to land while continuing a violent legacy of dispossession and erasure.[6]

A key function Plumwood tries to address in this politics of place is that of dematerialisation, which she describes as the political, economic and cultural process of becoming increasingly "out of touch with the *material conditions (including ecological conditions) that support or enable our lives*."[7] She drew the term from an essay by Barbara Ehrenreich which revisits a feminist politics of housework amidst the rapid expansion of the domestic cleaning industry in the United States. Based in a broad concern about the "systematic transfer of caring work from poor countries to the rich,"[8] Ehrenreich argues that global flows of care work have deepened its erasure and inequalities along stark lines of race, class and gender. Plumwood argues that a similar process is at work in a politics of place established around a bounded, special homeplace, where ethical and political accountability is denied in relations it refuses to recognise. A more accountable understanding of home and one's relations to it, she suggests, is expressed by Gagudiju elder Bill Neidjie in his writing about connection to the "place that grows you."[9] This understanding counters dematerialisation in its recognition of the active role of place in shaping our lives, understood "as a process in which the energy of others is actively invested."[10] This, Plumwood argued, suggests a need for a politics of place based in a "less monogamous ideal and more multiple relationship to place" that makes visible relations to and fosters accountability for the places "we don't know about, don't want to know about, and in a commodity regime don't ever need to know about or take responsibility for."[11] She called for a more critical politics and ethics of place - an approach to place that highlights injustices in power and position.

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[3] Ellis, *Braidwood, Dear Braidwood*, 25-26.
[4] Plumwood, "Nature as Agency," 21.
[5] Plumwood, "Shadow Places," 140.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid, 141.
[8] Ehrenreich, *Global Woman*, 11.
[9] Neidjie, *Kakadu Man*, 166.
[10] Plumwood, "Shadow Places," 145.
[11] Ibid, 147.

Passing through these ranges, what is now known as the Corn Trail preceded the King's Highway as a mountain passage connecting the coast to the inland. Prior to the British invasion of their sovereign land, this path was established and routinely walked by the Yuin, whose country extends from the NSW-Victorian border up the coastline to the Shoalhaven River. Budawang Elder Noel Butler links the Corn Trail to the Bogong Moth Dreaming, following the moth's migrations from the NSW south coast to the high country - an annual migration that is now feared to be on the verge of collapse.[12] The Corn Trail was appropriated by settlers as a trading route between coastal and inland settlements, harnessing old and establishing new relations between places, regions and countries in the interests of empire. Abandoned as a trading route by the late 19th century, the trail was re-established by the Australian military during WWII as an alternative passage through the mountains in case of Japanese invasion. In early 2019, following a broader shift in forestry policy in NSW that opened up more native forests for timber, logging began in two compartments of state forest along the Corn Trail. Shipped from Eden, a coastal town south of Batemans Bay, woodchips from the timber are destined for a pulping mill in China, where they are poured into a vat, boiled, chemically broken down and processed into paper products. From here, they are transformed into newspapers, writing paper and books – materials that fill Plumwood's home and sustained her work. Combined with woodchips from around the globe, bleached, broken down, and generating large quantities of wastewater, air emissions and residual chemical waste,[13] this literal dematerialisation shows dispersed relations that cast much longer shadows. Over December 2019 – January 2020, both the forest and the chip mill went up in flames as bushfires swept down Australia's eastern coastline. Fire also burned through rainforest in the Amazon. The relations and processes captured by the rainforest of Plumwood Mountain – the fertile gullies, the ocean winds – have in turn been captured by global powers that sustain some places and existences at great costs to others.

Inviting recognition of these larger powers and processes giving rise to place, Plumwood's place ethics, and her own capture with the plumwood tree, speaks to the need to engage with dynamics of interdependent existences, countering the remoteness that capitalist and colonial logic sustains. This shadowy path through the forest of Val Plumwood's home is only one of many through these mountain ranges: through locked up Yuin country and songlines, properties on the tablelands degraded through intensive agricultural production, and disrupted migratory paths of the Bogong moths. Despite Plumwood's place ethics, her critical success is qualified; her work makes visible these processes but Plumwood Mountain itself retains an ambivalent, captive status in regard to these social, commercial, geological, and colonial interdependencies.

Acknowledgements

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[12] Mansergh et al., "Bogong Moths Agrota infusa," 192.
[13] Gavrilescu et al., "Environmental impact of pulp."

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