Crocodile as Teacher

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INTRODUCTION

Environmental philosopher Val Plumwood marked her near-death experience with a crocodile in Kakadu National Park in 1985 as a seminal moment:

> It was really a life-changing event for me. Those final experiences have an incredible intensity – that's why they have such a life-changing power. You see things at that point which you wouldn't normally see; it strips away a lot of your illusions about life and death. It was quite a while before I took in the full extent of how it changed my way of looking at the world. It left me with a strong sense of gratitude about being alive, which has faded but never really gone, and a feeling that life is not to be wasted.[1]

It is only since Val's death in early 2008 that I decided to re-read the accounts of that near-death experience. While acknowledging the interpretation that the author has given to making meaning of her own narrative, I wish to discuss some aspects that have come to the fore in seeing the story through the lens of my own doctoral research, which examined the experiences of non-Indigenous persons being taken onto a sacred site by an Indigenous Elder. Discussion in the present paper stems from the specificity of examining one sacred site of the Yuin nation on the far south coast of New South Wales, with one particular Elder, in the face of what may be characterized as multiple Aboriginalities in Australia. Indigenous knowledge systems are as diverse as the diverse landscapes they occupy, yet strong commonalities also point to the notion of Indigenous ways of knowing.

My doctoral research, based on the phenomenological accounts of four people with little or no prior exposure to Indigenous culture, explores the impact of Aboriginal country on non-Indigenous persons and explicates a powerful experience of place. The complexity and richness of the intercultural space reveals a range of possibilities of new forms of engagement along the lines advocated by Plumwood as a form of "cultural convergence."[2] This is a term coined by Plumwood that has emerged from Aboriginal philosopher Mary Graham in her discussion of the possibility of "the embryonic form of an intact, collective spiritual identity for all Australians."[3] My research participants engaged not just in their initial experience of a sacred mountain through Indigenous teachings, but also, longer term, in "dialogue, learning, convergence and hybridization, [dynamical] and adaptive forms that are quite distinct from static cultural imitation."[4] It is these forms that Plumwood sees as constituting the nature of "cultural convergence."

In the present paper, through taking several elements of Plumwood's narrative ("Being Prey"), the experiences of one of my research participants and excerpts from phenomenological accounts of my own experiences in Central Australia, I draw out and

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[1] V. Plumwood (2004), "Taken by a Crocodile," *The Age* (12 Jan. 2004), at http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2004/01/09/1073437468260.html, accessed 6 June 2008.
[2] V. Plumwood (2000a), "Belonging, Naming and Decolonization," in *Ecopolitics: Thought and action* 1 (1), p. 93.
[3] M. Graham in *op. cit.*, V. Plumwood (2000a), p. 93.
[4] *Op. cit.*, V. Plumwood (2000a), p. 93

explore some aspects of the Kakadu episode that were not emphasized in Plumwood's own recounting of the crocodile encounter.

ENTERING INTO COUNTRY

> I set off on a day trip in search of an Aboriginal rock art site across the lagoon and up a side channel.[5]

When one sets foot on Aboriginal country, when one "meets" country, there is the tangible presence, such as a rock art cave, and there may be the intangible presence, of the more than human. How to know if our actions are appropriate in such a place? In Aboriginal Australia there is a known language, a known protocol for accessing places. If a site has a particular potency – in the words of my teacher Uncle Max Harrison, far south coast Yuin Elder, "mmm, there is special places!"[6] – then one must be even more prepared. Before entering into the sacred sites on Mt Gulaga, for instance, a ceremony is conducted: participants are painted on their faces with white ochre, red headbands are placed on foreheads, all are instructed in the behaviour expected (e.g., silence, no eating, drinking and no photos), and finally, each person is clapped into the site. When our presence is mediated by that of an Aboriginal person who is from that country, we are protected by the protocols that have been in place for millennia. It is another story when we wander unknowingly into a sacred or significant site.

> The drizzle turned to a warm rain within a few hours, and the magic was lost. The birds were invisible, the water lilies were sparser, and the lagoon seemed even a little menacing.[7]

Val was already experiencing the tone of this place, the potency of this country. They are feelings many of us have had: the hairs on the back of the neck, the goose bumps, the feeling that all is not well, not right. When land is acknowledged and known as teacher, signs such as these are crucial. Communication is taking place between the human "intruder" and the place; a dialogue has begun.

One of the participants in my research, Rowena, began to feel decidedly unsettled as soon as she set foot on the mountain:

> The walk up the mountain is slow and steady, and would have been a beautiful experience had I not been so stricken… As it happens, the experience took me by surprise … as soon as we got to the foot of the mountain, I knew I was in trouble. The panic feelings started to rise in me and I wasn't sure if I'd be able to control them. I spoke gently to myself and assured The Little One that she'd be ok.[8]

In my own experience of being in Central Australia in an essay entitled "Desire for Centering," I express the looming, undeniable presence of that country:

> I am disturbed… I am disturbed… disturbed by who knows what, but disturbed at being here. I feel alien yet familiar; I am known here, yet stranger. Seeking, asking permission from the spirits of this land makes little difference. I am still disturbed. I take myself to the dry old riverbed through snaky shivery grasses to old grandmother tree.[9]

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[5] V. Plumwood (2000b), "Being Prey," *UTNE Reader*, at http://www.utne.com/print-article.aspx?id=10166, accessed 3 May 2008, p. 1.
[6] C. Birrell (2007), *Meeting Country: Deep engagement with place and Indigenous culture*, PhD thesis, University of Western Sydney, p. 363.
[7] *Op. cit.*, V. Plumwood (2000b), p. 1.
[8] *Op. cit.*, C. Birrell (2007), p. 151.
[9] *Ibid.*, p. 237.

Craig san Roque speaks of country being a "seething mass of consciousness";[10] Deborah Bird Rose states that "country knows, hears, smells, takes notice, takes care, is sorry or happy," that it has "a consciousness and a will towards life."[11] Val entered into country unmediated by an Aboriginal Elder. This is something she acknowledged later in the story. However, she entered with a lot of respect both for the park as a whole and crocodiles in particular: "I was actively involved in preserving such places, and for me, the crocodile was a symbol of the power and integrity of this place and the incredible richness of its aquatic habitats."[12]

Sometimes, a respectful attitude is not enough in the face of sites of power and significance. In some parts of Aboriginal Australia, sweat is rubbed from the underarms onto the newcomer's body so that country knows him/her; country is called out to, addressed, introducing the stranger. Dawn Bessarab, a Bardi/Indjarbandi woman from Broome, describes it like this:

> Growing up in my family and learning from my Elders, I was told that whenever I visited someone else's country I should always yell out and tell them who I was, where I came from and what my business was. By showing respect for the spirits of the country, I would not come to any harm. But if I failed to do so, then something could happen to me and the people accompanying me.[13]

Protocols of entering country are considered important by Cameron and San Roque in their reflections on a colloquium of place in Central Australia. They point out the power of the land to affect change in people, "the ability of country itself to derange and rearrange the sensibilities of the human being."[14]

THE SPEAKING LAND

> When I pulled my canoe over in driving rain to a rock outcrop for a hasty, sodden lunch, I experienced the unfamiliar sensation of being watched.[15]

Who is doing the watching here? Is it the crocodile? Is it Aboriginal spirit presences? Is it the land itself?

Rowena, on the mountain, also senses the presence of being "watched by many pairs of eyes" but is reassured by their benign intention through a feeling that "they'll protect me."[16]

Uncle Max teaches non-Indigenous persons how to be with country, how to engage with country that is vital, alive and responsive:

> We walk the land, start feeling it out; look at different areas, what to keep away from; where people can just go and sit and meditate, and sit and get in contact with all the Old Fellas; try and teach them how to get, to receive those spiritual emails; try to let people start to learn to look at the land talking to them, and listening to the land talking to them.[17]

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[10] J. Cameron & C. San Roque (2003), "Coming into Country: Catalyzing a social ecology," *Philosophy, Activism, Nature* 2, p. 77.
[11] D. Rose (1996), *Nourishing Terrains: Australian Aboriginal views of landscape and wilderness*, Australian Heritage Commission, Canberra, p. 7.
[12] *Op. cit.*, V. Plumwood (2000b), p. 1.
[13] In S. Morgan, T. Mia & B. Kwaymullina (2008), *Heartsick for Country*, Fremantle Press, Fremantle, p. 51.
[14] *Op. cit.*, J. Cameron & C. San Roque (2003), p. 78.
[15] *Op. cit.*, V. Plumwood (2000b), p. 1.
[16] *Op. cit.*, C. Birrell (2007), p. 153.
[17] *Ibid.*, p. 121.

Notice the mention of places "to keep away from." When Rowena identified who was watching her on the mountain, it echoes Uncle Max's words of getting "in contact with the Old Fellas," the spirit presences:

> For a moment I thought that my mind was playing tricks on me when I saw a handsome Aboriginal man standing on the far bank, dressed in nothing but a loin cloth. He was leaning back on the rock and had one foot propped up behind him on the rock. I didn't want to move because I thought that he would disappear … then another appeared on the top of that bank, and still another on our side further up in the scrub… Just as they appeared, they stay for a while and then I don't see them any more. They never moved, they just stood there looking at us.[18]

Such an experience could be very unsettling, let alone believable. It was not until perhaps twelve months after the experience and on my third interview with her that Rowena told me for the first time about the Aboriginal sightings on the mountain. To inculcate such powerful experiences into a Western conceptual framework is no mean task. Stanner refers to it as "thinking black";[19] Uncle Max Harrison refers to non-Indigenous persons who can "look at Aboriginal sites with white eyes and walk out of some of those places with black minds."[20] It is instructive that Rowena had kept this experience to herself, not even sharing it with her husband and children: "It's an experience I haven't shared with anyone when retelling the story of my trip. I don't think anyone would believe me."[21]

In returning to Val's narrative, she is at the point where things are happening that appear to be hindering her progress towards the rock art location:

> The rain and wind grew more severe, and several times I pulled over to tip water from the canoe. The channel soon developed steep mud banks and snags. Farther on, the channel opened up and was eventually blocked by a large sandy bar. I pushed the canoe toward the bank, looking around carefully before getting out in the shallows and pulling the canoe up. I would be safe from crocodiles in the canoe I had been told but swimming and standing or wading at the water's edge were dangerous. Edges are one of the crocodile's favourite food-capturing places. I saw nothing, but the feeling of unease that had been with me all day intensified.[22]

If one recognizes that country has consciousness, then there is also the recognition that country has agency. Is Val being prevented from going further, deterred by a series of physical blockages? It is significant, I feel, that her "feelings of unease … intensified." Jennifer Biddle has described the potency of the land that still manifests even through an artistic depiction of that country: "Even if disengaged from the body of Ancestors, these sites, places and marks continue to hold precise affiliations and identifications, as well as powerful and potentially dangerous forces." In relation to the effect of this on a non-Indigenous person, Biddle states forcefully, "There is no where, no way, to position ourselves, as spectators, as outside of this experience and expression."[23]

LEARNING THE NEW LANGUAGE

When I took myself to "old grandmother tree" on the banks of the dried riverbed of the Todd River in Alice Springs, I was seeking respite from my "disturbed" being. Instead of respite, I became sick, then sicker over the ensuing month, with bouts of fear and a

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[18] *Ibid.*, pp. 163, 164.
[19] W. Stanner (1979), *White Man Got No Dreaming: Essays 1938–1973*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, p. 25.
[20] *Op. cit.*, C. Birrell (2007), p. 153.
[21] *Ibid.*, p. 164.
[22] *Op. cit.*, V. Plumwood (2000b), p. 1.
[23] J. Biddle (2006), "Breasts, Bodies, Art: Central Desert women's paintings and the politics of the aesthetic encounter," *Cultural Studies Review* 12 (1), p. 28.

pervasive feeling of unease on this land. I had no idea how to make sense of this experience.

Certain places are designated as distinctly female and distinctly male through Aboriginal cultural practices. As such, what are the implications for a non-Indigenous woman stumbling upon a sacred men's site? Aboriginal Australia is informed by a world of signs and significations that have been articulated through thousands of generations. Those of us new to this land have little knowledge or understanding of the language we encounter.

Val's narrative is building to its climax of the meeting with the crocodile, as surely as an Alfred Hitchcock thriller pulls us more and more into nail-biting terror. However, there is a point now that Val defines as the "telos" of the day that happens before that encounter. This is as crucial as the crocodile life/death encounter, in that it reveals country yet again trying to communicate. It is an articulation of country as teacher and an example of the reciprocity of a dialogue with place.

> Nothing stirred along the riverbank, but a great tumble of escarpment cliffs up on the other side caught my attention. One especially striking rock formation, a single large rock balanced precariously on a much smaller one, held my gaze. As I looked, my whispering sense of unease turned into a shout of danger. The strange formation put me sharply in mind of two things: of the Indigenous Gagadgu owners of Kakadu, whose advice about coming here I had not sought, and of the precariousness of my own life, of human lives. As a solitary specimen of a major prey species of the saltwater crocodile, I was standing in one of the most dangerous places on earth.[24]

Right in that very moment, Val "gets" the teachings: "the shout of danger" coming from the rock translates as her need to have consulted with traditional owners in order to gain permission to be in that country, and warns of the precariousness of the human in the cosmos. This is the intelligence of country speaking through a unitive world of meaningful communication.

> I turned back with a feeling of relief. I had not found the rock paintings, I rationalized, but it was too late to look for them. The strange rock formation presented itself instead as a telos of the day, and now I could go, home to trailer comfort.
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> As I pulled the canoe out into the main current, the rain and wind started up again. I had not gone more than five or ten minutes down the channel when, rounding a bend, I saw in midstream what looked like a floating stick, one I did not recall passing on my way up. As the current moved me toward it, the stick developed eyes. A crocodile!
>
> …Although I was paddling to miss the crocodile, our paths were strangely convergent.
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> …At the same instant, the crocodile rushed up alongside the canoe, and its beautiful, flecked golden eyes looked straight into mine.[25]

From the two balanced rocks as teacher, to the crocodile as teacher. What an extraordinarily beautiful moment of the meeting between the eyes of these two creatures! Could there be a recognition in this moment? What if Val had stepped right into a Dreaming site, stepped right into a story of that country wherein she was playing a role as old as the land itself?

Val was very clear about the nature of these teachings, and once she had escaped the clutches of the crocodile but was still aware of herself as prey, she seemed to acknowledge her place in a meaningful universe: "I struggled on, through driving rain, shouting for mercy from the sky, apologizing to the angry crocodile, repenting to this place for my intrusion."[26] And much later, another layer of knowing came to her:

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[24] *Op. cit.*, V. Plumwood (2000b), p. 1.
[25] *Ibid.*, pp.1, 2.
[26] *Ibid.*, p. 3.

> Before the crocodile, I wrote about the value of nature, but after the crocodile, I started writing about how we see ourselves as outside nature, about the power of nature and our illusions that we can control it, that we're not embodied beings and are apart from other animals.[27]

It is conjecture to imagine if Val Plumwood's theoretical orientation would have been vastly different had she heeded the advice of the ominous atmosphere, of the feelings of warning, of the shout of danger, and escaped the crocodile encounter. I am more interested in her "ways of knowing," the way she was being informed and communicated with on various levels. Gladys Milroy and her daughter Jill, both Palyku women from the Pilbara in Western Australia, have this comment about different ways of knowing:

> Sometimes we do not know what we have been given or why, so it may take a long time to "know." Timing is uncertain; it goes its own way. Things can change. Knowing may come in the depths of sleep, between sleeping and waking, or when we are awake but restful and quiet. In these times it is easier for us to listen to those other ways of knowing that are available to us. This is when we can tap into the deep knowledge all around us, not just the surface.[28]

CONCLUSION: COUNTRY IS CONSCIOUSNESS

Val Plumwood was tapping into the deep knowledge all around her on this day. Rowena was tapping into ways of knowing she could not fathom as the presences on the mountain insinuated themselves into her being. I had an inkling, much later, years even, from my Central Australian feeling of disturbance, that I had transgressed a site that was either not for women or only for initiated women. I also knew that I had not been granted permission to be on that country. Place is no blank space. It is alive, sentient, responsive and intelligent. It has agency in its own right and develops significant relationships as it erupts into human presence. Many of us are tapping into the deep knowledge all around us, even if it is mostly on an unconscious level, of the Aboriginal presence that has transcribed itself onto this landscape. The "cultural convergence"[29] is, and has been, happening in ways hardly articulated to date.

In 2000 Peter Read spoke of a "mature belonging" in Australia, one of separate but respectful distancing from Aboriginal attachments to this country. His call for cross-cultural distancing was hotly rejected by Plumwood in favour of cultural convergence. It may be that the notion of a "collective spiritual identity for all Australians"[30] is and has always been, right beneath our very feet. My research results and the crocodile encounter of Val Plumwood lead me also to reject Read's call to "leave the spirits to the people who made them or were made by them."[31]

The spirits, it seems, will decide how, when and to whom they will speak.

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[27] *Ibid.*, p. 3.
[28] In *op. cit.*, S. Morgan, T. Mia & B. Kwaymullina (2008), p. 23.
[29] *Op. cit.*, V. Plumwood (2000a), p. 93.
[30] M. Graham in *op. cit.*, V. Plumwood (2000a), p. 93.
[31] P. Read (2000), *Belonging: Australians, place and Aboriginal ownership*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 204, 208.