

Shadow Places and the Politics of Dwelling

by **Val Plumwood**

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The Problem: Place Discourse and Ecological Consciousness

Much contemporary environmental theory, especially in the eco-humanities, focuses on place as a locus of continuity, identity, and ecological consciousness, and on 'place education'. Recovering a storied sense of land and place is a crucial part of the restoration of meaning. But if commodity culture engenders a false consciousness of place, this meaning can be fake. There is a serious problem of integrity for the leading concepts of much contemporary place discourse, especially the concept of *heimat* or dwelling in 'one's place' or 'homeplace', the place of belonging. The very concept of a singular homeplace or 'our place' is problematised by the dissociation and dematerialisation that permeate the global economy and culture. This culture creates a split between a singular, elevated, conscious 'dwelling' place, and the multiple disregarded places of economic and ecological support, a split between our idealised homeplace and the places delineated by our ecological footprint. In the context of the dominant global consciousness, ideals of dwelling compound this by encouraging us to direct our honouring of place towards an 'official' singular idealised place consciously identified with self, while disregarding the many unrecognised, shadow places that provide our material and ecological support, most of which, in a global market, are likely to elude our knowledge and responsibility. This is not an ecological form of consciousness.

Ostensibly place-sensitive positions like bioregionalism evade rather than resolve the problem of the split by focussing exclusively on singular self-sufficient communities, thus substituting a simplistic ideal of atomic places for recognition of the multiple, complex network of places that supports our lives. If being is always being towards the other, the atomism and hyper-separation of self-sufficiency is never a good basic assumption, for individuals or for communities. Communities should always be imagined as in relationship to others, particularly downstream communities, rather than as singular and self-sufficient. An ecological re-conception of dwelling has to include a justice perspective and be able to recognise the shadow places, not just the ones we love, admire or find nice to look at. So ecological thought has to be much more than a literary rhapsody about nice places, or about nice times (epiphanies) in nice places. And it must crucially, as a critical ecological position, be able to reflect on how nice (north) places and shadow (south) places are related, especially where north places are nice precisely because south places are not so nice.

I want to argue that dematerialisation in commodity culture engenders a *false consciousness of place* whose deconstruction must be a crucial part of any ecojustice approach to environmental degradation. It is not, as some Marxists claim, that an emphasis on place is simply bourgeois romanticism, or that place is unimportant. The place dimension is vitally important. It is rather that this false consciousness is expressed in a literature that treats attachments to place in dematerialising ways as unified, innocent, and singularistic, the environmental project simplified down to one of increasing attachment to and care for 'one's place'. I think this is over-singularised, and much like suggesting that celebrating the beauty of wives is the answer to gender inequality and oppression, the Song of Solomon as the answer to women's liberation. Contemplation of the agency, power and mystery of places potentially has a lot to contribute to understanding our relationships to the earth (see especially Rose, "Dialogue"). But unless further elaborated, I think place-based discourse is open to some very adverse interpretations, and its tendency to replace a more clearly focussed body of ecological and environmental critique and awareness may become a matter for concern.

So I want to ask two questions especially of current place-based discourse:

- 1: What (more?) do we need to add to place awareness/encounter/ attachment projects or discourses about SENSE OF PLACE to have them converge with an ecological awareness or environmental justice projects?
- 2: Can discourses of place and belonging marginalise denied, dislocated and dispossessed identities, privileging 'the self-identical and well-rooted ones who have natural rights and stable homes'? (Haraway 215; Plumwood, "Environmental", 23) Is the ability to maintain access (unproblematically) to a special homeplace and to protect it not at least partly a function of one's privilege/power in the world?

We need to replace loose discourse about 'sense of place', I suggest, by *place-based critique*, that can make room for the power analysis of an environmental justice perspective. To resolve problems of NIMBYism in place and situate place in terms of an ecological consciousness, we need an ethics and politics of place, where the latter are to be understood in Nancy Fraser's terms not as disconnected, as in the story told by the usual suspects, but as importantly related. Such a critique must aim to replace the consumer-driven narratives of place that mark our lives by different ones that make our ecological relationships visible and accountable. This has been one of the aims of bioregionalism, and the critical place project I am advocating can alternatively be seen as a critical reworking or reframing of bioregionalism. Critical bioregionalism, on my reading, must help make visible north/south place relationships, where the north/south pole operates as a correlate of (various different kinds of) privilege,¹ exemplifying certain relationships of domination metaphorised as place, especially sacrificial and shadow or denied places.

Provided it is not treated in bland and over-simplifying ways, there are a lot of very important things we can do with a critical discourse of place. Developing a politics and ethics of place has great potential to clarify, focus and connect environmental and ecojustice concerns. Just as in the gender case, an important missing ingredient in the bland 'celebration' of 'sense of place' is a consideration of power relationships—whose place is made better, whose worse, and what patterns can be discerned? Discerning patterns of sacrificial and shadow places, based on the power and privilege—or lack of it—of the human communities associated with places is a major focus of critical geography and of studies of environmental racism (see for example Hayden; Bullard). Similarly, an anti-colonial critique can mobilise the inappropriate sense of place and the false consciousness of place typical of colonialism to press home an important critique of contemporary settler cultures and their maladaptation to the land, in which illusions about settler identity are linked to illusions about 'our place', or 'Home'.²

This kind of place critique holds out the prospect of developing the understanding of place in a way that connects with and supplements the ecofeminist critique of nature, as a category defined by a dualistic narrative of splits. In its critique of western dualisms, ecofeminism has certainly provided a good basis for understanding a kind of erasure of place that has resulted from its fragmentation by the mind/body, reason/emotion, respect/use and other splits characteristic of contemporary western culture. *The dissociation of the affective place (the place of and in mind, attachment and identification, political effectiveness, family history, ancestral place) from the economic place* that is such a feature of the global market is yet another manifestation of the mind/body dualism that has shaped the western tradition. Concepts and practices that erase these aspects of place help to erase an awareness of nature as part of our lives. Contemporary market-based practices that effect a dissociation between affective/identity places and places of production reduce and fragment place, stripping it of meaning. This analogue of the mind/body split in the contemporary structure of place presents serious problems of integrity for much contemporary place discourse and can greatly limit its usefulness for ecological concerns.

Dematerialisation and Place

Dematerialisation (a term I owe to Barbara Ehrenreich), applied to cultures, traditions as well as processes, is the process of becoming more and more out of touch with the *material conditions (including ecological conditions) that support or enable our lives*. Losing track of them means making more and more exhausting and unrealistic demands on them, and being deluded about who both we and others are. This means losing track of the labour of others that supports our lives and the labour and agency of nature, of earth others—what some socialist feminists call the sphere of reproduction in contrast to production. The flight from the material is the political and economic and cultural process that corresponds to the mind/body and spirit/matter dualisms of the western tradition and encourages their elaboration into the dematerialising frameworks that govern our lives, especially in the global economy.

One aspect of dematerialisation is the division between mind people and body people—expressed increasingly in both class and gender terms. 'To be cleaned up after, says Ehrenreich, 'is to achieve a certain magical weightlessness and immateriality'—or rather the illusion of these modes of being (Ehrenreich 103). This is in part the foundation of what has been known as class-consciousness — think of people who are used to having servants and who act as if the associated services are beyond their attention. Another closely related form of denial is to be able, as privileged nations, to ignore, neglect or deny our energy use and pollution trail, one kind of ecological footprint—'being picked up after' by the biosphere. Real humans labour mentally, and material work, bodily labour, is increasingly and ideally the sphere of machines, except for a few holdovers like giving birth and suckling.

Dematerialising political structures erase the agency of the more-than-human sphere, cause us to misunderstand our lives, and thus engender a false consciousness that justifies appropriation. The illusions and irresponsibility resulting from the underlying cultural problematic of dematerialisation have intensified with increasingly globalised and commodified relationships to nature and place. Another aspect of dematerialisation, which I also discussed in my last book (Plumwood, "Environmental"), is remoteness from ecological consequences and illusions of our independence of nature and of the irrelevance of nature.

The logical end-point of the striving to deny and devalue the sphere of the body, nature, labour and matter is the retreat of the affluent from these spheres into a state of remoteness, of virtual existence and 'ghostly pursuits like stock-trading, image making, and opinion polling; real work, in the old-fashioned sense of labour that engages hand as well as eye, that tires the body and directly alters the physical world tends to vanish from sight' (Ehrenreich 103), and thus, of course, from responsibility. So, I would add, does our ecological footprint, and what can be thought of as the supporting labour of nature required to hold up that foot. The process of heedless dematerialisation in our culture may end in our final dematerialisation, in the sense of vanishing act, from the earth.

Attachment to Place

Place wisdom usually sees salvation in attachment to place, and enjoins us to care for 'our place'. There is much to be said for love for a specific individual, animal or place. Love can develop capacities for perception and sensitivity that might otherwise be stunted, and can provide a basis to spread its virtues of attention, compassion and care to a wider field. Love for a specific earth place can provide a basis to care for other (similar) places. Participating regularly in contexts of neighbourhood can counter anthropocentric ways of thinking and disrupt human self-enclosure. Local nature study and observation can foster respectful disclosure and friendship, mutual knowledge and care, as well as understanding of the ways and needs of non-human neighbours. Whether local knowledge makes footprint relations more visible is contextually variable and contestable, but not the need for a place-sensitive culture whose institutions and customs can support a deep, rich connection to land and place.

But place attachment is developed and exercised in the context of dominant market cultures which commodify land and place, and of markets in labour usually requiring individual workers who have few or portable attachments (such as the nuclear family or less). Place attachment is the first and most basic casualty of this attachment- minimizing system, while the commodification of the land presupposes an instrumental model of land relationship that makes attachment to place hard to sustain. Since the industrial revolution, attachment to place has been punished in the economic and employment systems of late globalised capitalism, and current examples are either hangovers from an incompletely realised project or practises of resistance. Dominant commodity culture marginalises nature and place, and what measure of land attachment it permits persists in spite of institutions like the market.

It may be vital to love, but in these conditions, individual love for place is unlikely to be innocent, may register false consciousness and be exercised at the expense of other places, and fostering individual attachment must be incomplete as a strategy. So it is crucial for the integrity of place discourse that it give more consideration to its own limits and potential for misuse. Included here is considering the usefulness of indigenous models of place relationship for contemporary western contexts and for ecological concern. Some of these limits of application arise for the west as result of the fragmentation and malformation of place by the mind/body, reason/emotion and respect/use and other splits characteristic of western culture. It is these splits that frustrate place discourse as a genuine ecologically-aware discourse. A more unified place relationship, as in indigenous examples, can be a wonderful instrument or voice for communication with and sensitivity to the earth and other humans. But current proposals (like bioregionalism and self-sufficiency) for reunifying place for the west will miss the connection with environmental problems unless they take better account of the splits, especially the mind/body split in its place manifestations.

These splits register in the way we try to define or characterise place. Place is thicker and more concrete than mere location, and story helps makes it concrete; but it is not enough to say that place is the intersection of multiple narratives—we can say this of anything at all. I think we need to keep our feet on the ground here (literally), and avoid overly dematerialising place concepts: place can be focussed widely or narrowly in relation to different frameworks, but in a materially-embodied life has ultimately to locate a piece of ground, a piece of the earth.² But these problems about place are minor in comparison to those that beset the rest of the place-lovers' apparatus, the concept of giving honour to place in terms of celebrating 'one's own place' or 'one's place'. Bioregionalists urge that this must be 'the watershed', the basic place that commands our identity and loyalty. But we need to be sensitive to the nuances, the *kinds* of attachment involved. Here I fear that the influence of Heidegger may be sending a promising place critique in the wrong direction, through an excessively singularised focus on a central, set-apart home-place or One True dwelling place, producing a Cosy Corner or 'Inside the Beltway' account of place that obscures ecological issues and north/south relations.

The Heideggerian singularity of focus legitimates a narrowing of place relationship to a special place, in a way that supports a concept of the home property of a (national) self that is strongly set apart from and above other places, in terms of care and priority. Centric place ideals of military empire and colonial privilege, as expressed in the motto *Deutschland Uber Alles*, and in the image of the moated or hill-placed castle or the defensively hedged or fenced colonial 'big-house', rest on the subordination or instrumentalisation of other places. Perhaps it is less Heidegger's anti-modernism (as critics like Hay have claimed) we should associate with Nazi ideology than this ideal of a pure home, an ideal, strong hyperseparate seat of self. This One True Place can easily become a national-cultural home, a special place, elevated above all others, whose purification demands the eviction of alien elements. This discourse can legitimate projects of perfecting and purifying home at the expense of other, lesser homes—those of 'less civilised' indigenous others who do not 'dwell', whose ties to the land do not take the form of cultivation labour, and whose places can be deemed degradable under the guise of improving civilisation.

A One True Place account like this is quite compatible with the dwellers' continued participation in environmental degradation. Attachment to the One True Place is no guarantee of honour to other places, and certain modes of attachment may even require the degradation of other places. The British Royal Family loves Balmoral, and they see to the protection and improvement of this place, but their care is made possible by the fact that they have their money invested in a swag of companies that are despoiling systematically other people's places, and relations of power embedded in the commodity ensure that they need neither know nor care about those places.

For a sounder and more illuminating way to understand 'one's place' or home I think we should listen to some indigenous advice from Bill Neidjie. 'You got to hang onto this story because the earth, *this ground, earth where you brought up, this earth he grow you*' (Neidjie, "Story", 166), and he repeats the point elsewhere: '*This piece of ground he grow you*' (Neidjie, "Story", 61). This piece of ground that grows you (in the same way, he insists, as it grows a plant or a tree) would also usually be identified by indigenous people as 'country', the place of one's clan or community, is also connected to other countries in various cross-cutting ways. Neidjie's wisdom reflects a view of nature and place as, to a much greater extent than in western culture, an active agent in and co-constituter of our lives,⁴ but also a view of 'growing up' as a process in which the energy of others is actively invested.⁵ But it also reveals some important ways in which indigenous concepts of 'place' or 'country' might be thought of as integrated in a way that those of the dominant culture may be thought of as fragmented. The average Australian moves 13 times, and 'country' can be multi-sited. Which bit are we selecting as 'your place'? The answer may be well an abstraction, something like 'a vaguely identified nation-state', rather than a specific piece of the earth.

This assumption of singularity can be used to privilege a place of consciousness and self-identity over the materially-supportive but denied places of the other, conceived as absent referent. There are strong resonances of mind-body dualism in these constructions, with their privileging of a mind which is dependent on but unaware of a maternal, material body it is depleting. Such constructions are inimical to any self-reflective project of inter-species negotiation and accommodation.

The most serious problem for the integrity of current discourses of 'one's place' is the split between the land of attachment, one's self conscious identity place (usually the home), and the economic place, or rather economic *places*, those places on earth that support your life. Writing the land of attachment, in a recent collection for example, professes a singular ideal of 'a story alive with *one place* on earth, a place that calls us home' ... 'I would piece you together from what you tell me of home' (Tredinnick 31, 28). The editor has sought stories that 'sing into life a place that is sustaining, sacred, special to a writer who lives in it or remembers it well, a place where deep attachments rest, a storied place' (31). In the vast majority of cases in the contemporary global context, a singular concept of place has to be a dematerialised and false consciousness of place—hence not an ecological concept of place or self.

The story of One True Place the contributors are required to tell may also be seen as an attempt to bring over into white culture indigenous ideals of country. The problem is that in the context of the dominant global consciousness, such ideals encourage us to direct our honouring of place towards an 'official' singular idealised special place consciously identified with self or soul, while disregarding the many unrecognised places that provide the material support of self, most of which, in a global market, are likely to elude knowledge and responsibility. This split between a singular, elevated, conscious 'dwelling' place and the multiple disregarded places of economic support is one of the most important contemporary manifestations of the mind/body split (incorporating also elements of reason/emotion dualism). Thus expressed, the mind/body split permeates the global economy, and is inseparable from our concepts of identity, economy and place.

What makes such a singular discourse of 'country' and self-place honest and life-sustaining in the indigenous case and a dishonest and life-defeating expression of false consciousness in the consumerist case is precisely that in the indigenous case *the places of attachment that form your country of*

the heart are the very same places that do 'grow you', that support your material as well as your emotional life. In the consumer case they are usually (perhaps even necessarily, to the same extent that production is a degrading process) different places, are multiple. For Neidjie, 'this ground, earth where you brought up, this earth that grows you' —all these concepts can coincide, be unified, in 'country', the place of attachment and mutual life-giving, which eventually even recycles the human as sustenance for other life-forms seen as having a similar relationship to country. The place of attachment, the place of mind and identity, and the actual place of material support are one and the same. For us, they are split along mind/body lines.

It will not do to evade the problem of the split by pretending that we already have a unified concept or can easily get it by paying more attention to or celebrating our places of attachment. Nor will it do to substitute a distant and dubious ideal of self-sufficiency for consideration of the multiple places that support our lives. What is the effect then of starting from the other, materialist end and taking this indigenous concept of country [eg Neidjie's] as a criterion of 'your place', so that 'your place' is those parts of the earth that 'grow you', that support your life? This seems to correspond quite closely to the recently introduced idea of 'the ecological footprint', as all those places that bear the ecological traces of one's passage, or that carry the ecological impacts of supporting your life. Taking this concept instead of some consciousness-based, singular notion of 'home-place' or dwelling-place as basic has some startling consequences, revealing the extent of the false consciousness and fragmentation of place in the dominant culture, and the need for understanding both as an important part of a critical account of place. The indigenous criterion reveals, as *denied or shadow places*, all those places that produce or are affected by the commodities you consume, places consumers 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.

These places remote from self, that we don't have to know about but whose degradation we as commodity consumers are indirectly responsible for, are the shadow places of the consumer self. The places that take our pollution and dangerous waste, exhaust their fertility or destroy their indigenous or nonhuman populations in producing our food, for example, all these places we must own too. We must own to the coral reefs wrecked to supply the clownfish in the fish tank, the places ruined by and for fossil fuel production. We must smell a bit of wrecked Ogoniland in the exhaust fumes from the air-conditioner, the ultimate remoteness, put-it-somewhere-else-machine. On the Neidjie criterion, we would have to accept all these shadow places too as 'our' place, not just the privileged, special, recognised place, the castle-of-the-self-place called home.

I am not of course arguing that there's necessarily anything wrong with loving a special place, or that justice demands that we each love and care for all places equally, any more than it requires that one love one's child only as much as all other children and no more. But justice does require that we take *some* account of other children, and of our own and our child's relationship to them, perhaps even that we not aim to have our child thrive at the expense of these other children. In the same way, in the place case, I think we may have to start the process of recognising denied places by owning multiplicity, envisioning a less monogamous ideal and more multiple relationship to place. An important part of the environmental project can then be reformulated as a place principle of environmental justice, *an injunction to cherish and care for your places, but without in the process destroying or degrading any other places, where 'other places' includes other human places, but also other species' places.* This accountability requirement is a different project, and much more politically and environmentally demanding project, than that of cherishing one's own special place of dwelling. It is a project whose realisation, I would argue, is basically incompatible with market regimes based on the production of anonymous commodities from remote and unaccountable places. A practice that requires a multiple place consciousness can help to counter dematerialisation and remoteness.

Reworking Bioregionalism

The emphasis on singularity of place usually leads those who have got this far in the ecojustice critique of place to advocate some form of bioregionalism or localisation devolving economic production to a single, small, unified 'home' community as a way of healing the fragmentation of place. There is likely no unique solution to the problem of recognising denied places, but we can suggest some general principles in terms of parallels with other mind/body resolutions. Think what it would mean to acknowledge and honour all the places that support you, at all levels of reconceptualisation, from spiritual to economic, and to honour not just this more fully-conceived 'own place' but the places of others too. Such a program is politically radical, in that it is incompatible with an economy of privileged places thriving at the expense of exploited places. Production, whether from other or self-place, cannot take the form of a place-degrading process, but requires a philosophy and economy of mutual recognition.

What is valid in bioregionalism is the demand for place honesty and responsibility, which involves countering remoteness and denial. Filling these out requires an ethics of place and a politics of place. Their development is stunted because the ideal is so often automatically identified with living in One True place, with living in a self-sufficient household or community, or in a single watershed. But we could draw another lesson from the indigenous model—that we need to develop forms of life and production where the land of the economy (production, consumption, and service provision) and the land of attachment, including care and responsibility, are one and the same.

This means that there are two basic routes to restoring place honesty: we can retain highly singularistic ideals of place and try to reorganise economic life to fit them—the self-sufficiency route—or, alternatively, we can recognize the reality of multiple relationships to place but insist that they be re-shaped as meaningful and responsible. The last is the suppressed alternative, the ecojustice route to dealing with the mind/body splits of place. I am tempted to swim against the current of the self-sufficiency tide and point out the virtues of this different route to honesty, fearing that the return to the small, wholesome, pure community is a cup western culture may have poisoned forever. In a colonising and dualistic culture, advocacy of singularistic allegiances to place is likely to express or encourage false consciousness. In western culture, so strongly drawn to and corrupted by the patterns of mind/body dualism which deny or devalue a supportive material order conceptualised as other, the self-sufficiency route courts trouble in the form of denial of dependency on an inconsiderable, inferiorised other that is outside the system of privilege and self-enclosure. Ideals of self-sufficiency can idealise a 'community' version of individualism which does not envision the community in relationship with others and which thus neglects or suppresses the key justice (north/south) issue of relationship with other communities—downstream communities especially. Taking responsibility for remote places requires strong institutional and community networking arrangements.

Of course we can also mix these strategies, and a judicious combination of local and non-local production and care seems the most likely as well as the most sustainable outcome. This means sourcing more of our needs from local land, using forms of discount for the local perhaps, and extending public and political forms of care and value to those non-local areas our production and consumption impact upon—for example by giving value and standing to distant land and its ecological services and taking some social responsibility for its maintenance. But we have many options other than self-sufficiency for the mix here. To envisage these options, think about the difference between the ideals of growing all your own vegetables in your own garden, versus participating in a community garden, in Consumer Supported Agriculture, or in a cooperative working for trade justice, as contrasting and potentially complementary routes to place accountability.

An ecojustice ideal of this kind for an ethical politics of place is not incompatible with and can even support some limited forms of self-reliance, but it is clearly not the same as, and does not imply, any ideal of self-sufficiency based on a relationship to place so singular that it would exclude exchange. The responsibility principle is compatible with some forms of exchange, and with the desirability of some exchange of goods and bads between places, provided this meets the ecojustice criterion of making one or both places involved in the exchange better and no places worse. Is it not perhaps poorly accountable commodity systems of exchange at whose door we should lay much of the blame for the contemporary fragmentation of place, rather than the existence of exchange itself? Exchange could also have at its core celebration and exchange of place and place knowledge, and take place under conditions of connection, knowledge, care and responsibility. If unity versus dissociation are not the only options for relationships with place, a critical sense of place based on knowledge and care for multiple places could be the form of place consciousness most appropriate to contemporary planetary ecological consciousness.

Val Plumwood (1939-2008) was a founding intellectual and activist in the global movement that came to be known as ecofeminism. She published three major books as well as over a hundred articles and encyclopaedia entries, and her work has been translated into numerous languages. In February 2008 she died of a stroke at her home in the bush, aged sixty-eight. Please see Deborah Rose's [obituary tribute](#) in this issue.

Notes

¹ I do not want to say however that all important place relations reduce to the north/south set, or that these concepts always offer the best analysis. I do not think different kinds or dimensions of privilege or oppression can be reduced to one, although those with sufficiently common logic may come together with useful parallels in 'the master subject', outlined in Plumwood 1993.

² See the discussion in Rose, "Reports", Chapter 2.

³ Thus Bill Neidjie: 'This piece of ground he grow you' (Neidjie, "Kakadu", 166).

⁴ 'Country', as Rose, "Dialogue", points out, can nurture you, call to you, and take up other very active roles.

⁵ This suggests a parallel with Teresa Brennan's maternal energetics; see Brennan.

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