

Heading South

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It's Easter, the old pagan festival of spring turned upside down in this southern place where spring festivals are celebrated in autumn. On this southernmost island of this southern place, I am walking the South Cape walk² with my daughter during her school holiday. She laughs at my old-mum awkwardness, unsure of my footing along rocky paths; she walks ahead of me through various forests of differing personalities, greeted by trickling creeks and the openness of windy grasslands.

As we walk, my internal world weaves its way through the places we pass through. My preoccupation with the work of Val Plumwood seeps out into the landscape, which responds in kind. Alongside the rhythm of my footsteps, a chorus of her ideas about the western relationship with nature keep me in good company. I ponder on Plumwood's violent exchange with the wildlife of Northern Australia which forced her to consider herself as nutrition, turning our usual perception of our place in the hierarchy of creatures upside down.³ Through becoming potential food in a close encounter with a crocodile, Plumwood was confronted with the surprise of being in such an unfamiliar position in the food chain. Her surprise led to meditations on human vulnerability. This in turn leads me to consider my own vulnerability as I journey into the Southern wilderness. My culture has built numerous fortresses to protect me from feeling vulnerable in the face of nature. These fortresses have become so ubiquitous that we have begun to consider this nature as fragile and in need of *our* protection. Walking further from the company of other humans, and deeper into the belly of this beast though, I wonder if it isn't *humans* who need that protection instead.

After several hours we reach the end of our walk. Still pondering my vulnerability, we set up our little camp behind a protective layer of bush which dances all day and night in an awkward and repetitive jig with the wind and rain. I imagine the fear pioneers must have felt while walking through this wilderness – fear of the unknown. Now, with the path well defined and no need to orienteer for ourselves, it isn't the wilderness that I fear, but other humans. After setting up our tent, despite weary legs, we take a short walk over a moonscape of unexpected black rock to the isolated and grimly beautiful South Cape Bay.

The landscape has swallowed us as we travelled south, deeper into its body. My daughter and I communicate with each other – through the eye rolls, the gestures, laughter and words – but as our footsteps become part of the path, our attention is dispersed across the plants, the creatures, the formations of land and the dynamic exchange that we have become a part of. At South Cape Bay we have reached some internal place within the landscape where we humans are minute and quiet, listening to the beating heart, the life and purpose that consumes us. We have slipped beneath the covers of the world on our onto-poetic journey.⁴ We recognise the grass and rocks as our sisters, and feel strange responding to the polite greetings of other bushwalkers.

Mathews describes onto-poetics as the meaningful engagement between the self and the world; a way to enter into relationship with what is ordinarily considered inert and lifeless matter. Through onto-poetics, matter and mind, subject and object weave together and lose the distinctions they are normally granted under traditional ways of knowing.⁵ Unbeknownst to my daughter and I, we have stepped into this liminal space

and do not question our communication with nature, as it has come as naturally to us as breathing, but gradually, as we head south.

We wander along the beach of South Cape Bay, where various weather- and sea-sworn sticks, feathers and shells call out to me with the beauty of their perfect lines and shapes. I consider keeping them as souvenirs of our trip. I turn them in my hand admiring their weight, their texture, the way the wind travels over their surface. Each one talks to me of its belongingness to this beach. Each one I return to the sandy surface so as not to disrupt the balance of this perfect place.

This is not a one-sided conversation. I acknowledge the wisdom of things, against the advice of my elders: Plato, Aristotle, Descartes and other ancient white men whose voices have constructed the architecture through which my culture maintains the boundaries between humans and the world around us. My body finds the cracks in the monolith they have built; my ears are open, and I hear the voices of sticks and shells. These objects tell me of their purpose, their intentionality.⁶ I listen, the teacher a student, a human minority here.⁷

During this process of picking up and putting down, I am reminded of a pipi shell⁸ I collected from Cockle Creek⁹ not long ago. Sitting half submerged in the sand, washed with each wave as the ocean's brine ebbed and flowed, guided by the moon and elements; its colours spoke to me – the deep brown, shining hints of blues and purples – the colours I associate with that wonderful part of the world. It had a natural hole in it, made as some small salty creature ate its way through the hard protective exterior to get to the fleshy meal inside.

The earring I was wearing fitted perfectly through the hole formed in the pipi shell in this way, and I have worn it ever since. However now that it has been removed from the beach, the sand, the living water and all that informed its essence, its colour has dulled. It's now a flat grey brown, and lacks the animation that first attracted me to it. Still beautiful, but wearing its beauty on the inside (of me) as the story, the memory of my connection to that place. Conscious of the damage I have caused, I've considered returning it; I've had the opportunity several times since, finding myself on that same beach at Cockle Creek. Instead it remains trapped. It crunches against the metal of my earring when I roll over in my sleep, informing the authority of my dreams of its capture.

Instead of being fed by the tides and moonlight, the pipi shell now sits with me in my air conditioned office by the glow of electric lights and scrolling screens, trapped in the pillowy embrace of my noise-cancelling headphones. A caught and caged once wild being, it patiently wears away, waiting optimistically for its release. I have ensnared this shell and refuse to let it go; I cling to my memories of beach and smell. In my desperation to hold and own some of this wildness – to consume and somehow become, I dull and kill and tame. In doing so I have conformed with the values of my culture, which considers nature as inert and lifeless matter available for (western) humans to consume at will.¹⁰

It is my habit to collect relics from my various walks; instinctively picking up natural objects to become enamoured by them. In the process my home has become an altar to the outdoors; to Nature. Special rocks and bones litter every surface – souvenirs of a multitude of forgotten moments and stories. I struggle to decide if my acts are those of adoration and respect, or part of the process of imposing my ownership, of consuming, in the way Plumwood^{11,12,13} describes as a fundamental characteristic of the western mind, and one which lies at the heart of current ecological crises. Swimming against the tide of my apparently impenetrable faults, I observe, I consider, I listen.

South Cape Bay tells me its wordless stories through patterns on the sandy dunes left by grass tips as they are moved by the Southern air currents which rush across the cold southern sea towards the warmth of land. The grass lunges to the right, dragging its tips in a semi-circular motion up and down the dusty sand, leaving a multitude of right hand parentheses, repeatedly completing citations that were never begun. Rocks rounded by wind, sea, each other – rolling through seasons, whispering the same secrets they whispered when the only feet that walked this beach were brown or clawed. None of this entity; this *being*, is willing to leave this place with me; to become a beautiful trinket of *my* personhood.

South Cape Bay expresses her *character*, her unique *consciousness* in the bull kelp piled up like mermaid corpses, sleeping sailors spat out by the sea; hiding tracts of discarded ship rope, plastic refuse from crayfish pots and other miscellaneous debris that I am devastated to find on this isolated and uninhabited beach.

Plumwood¹⁴ called for the telling of stories which counter the reductionism of the dualistic view that humans are the sole possessors of intentionality. In claiming intentionality as an exclusively human characteristic, the rest of the world is left inert and valuable only to the extent of what it might offer human life. The structures that my culture has built to protect us from the wild were also designed to muffle the cries of sticks and feathers and places such as South Cape Bay, who still retains the power of her voice. Ontopoetics¹⁵ elucidates a pathway to sharing this story that would otherwise remain in a state of somnolence; untold and dusty.

In the wind and drizzle, my daughter and I are searching for a dead juvenile whale whose corpse we have been told lies rotting somewhere on this sandy stretch. We share a morbid appreciation of the bones and eroding composition of de-animated bodies. In our search along the sand for this cadaverous treasure, my eyes fall on a beautifully shaped piece of white plastic; its original form long since forgotten; it is now visible only to me. Looking like some sort of tooth, I pick it up, hopeful of a treasure. Upon checking though, I detect its plastic form. A tiny piece, smaller than my fingernail; the first day on the beach I shamefully drop it back onto the ground in disappointment and continue with our search for the putrefying baby whale.

The second day, along this kilometres-long beach, synchronicity leads me back. Through the sand which blasts along relentlessly with the wind, my steps meander back and forth from high tideline to water's edge. My mind is caught by the call of crows when the familiar little white shape catches my eye. I recognise the same miniscule morsel of plastic and pick it up again. I see it differently now – not discarded debris to remind me of the faults of my culture, but a gift from this place to teach me a sacred story of which words are incapable of penetrating. This time I can keep it.

Other pieces of organically shaped plastic, moulded by time spent rolling along the sea floor, or by the grinding journey through some larger fishes' intestines begin to catch my eye. Sandy Cape Beach teaches me to appreciate these plastic gifts in the same way I appreciated the lines and shapes of sticks and feathers yesterday. Once my discrimination against plastic and human-made debris erodes, I start to recognise the beauty in the garish colour freckling the beach.

A blue piece ironically looks like a rock from the benthic surface of a suburban fish tank. A small piece of rope; its weave loosened by time in the sea like its first purpose. Now useless, it will tie nothing together, yet the beauty of its loose weave gives it new life in my eyes. I pick up the side of a plastic cup-a-soup cup, its print fading and no longer legible. More irony – a blue bottle top, emblazoned with the word 'aqua' joins my collection. These are the things South Cape Bay graciously lets me take for souvenirs. The abiding relationship between this place and humans long before I set foot in its violently windy caress whispers and screeches along the underside of each grain of sand. The beach attempts to renegotiate her relationship with humans by gifting me these plastic treasures. She erodes the boundaries set between what is *natural* and what is *litter*; what is *inert* and what is *autonomous*.

If we are to recognise ourselves as humble members of the systems of nature,¹⁶ the appeal remains to also find a way to embrace the relics of our past and current lives – much of which will persist for hundreds of thousands of years. South Cape Beach allowed me to see the beauty in some of these discarded relics, but I am challenged to expand this view to embrace other aspects of the trail my culture leaves in its wake – oil spills, air pollution, toxic waste, climate change.

Each time my daughter and I return to the beach, we forget to bring a bag for picking up litter as is our usual beach walking practice. Instead of rubbish though, this ancient living being, alive at the core of every rock, with the rainbow coloured reflections in each bubble of sea foam, with the dancing tussocks of grass, with the sea lice jumping from under its seaweedy surface, with the thermals that hold crows and sea gulls and albatross so securely they don't need to exert themselves for a single flap of wing, from the rotting cadaver of the baby whale, at least two brilliantly blue penguin corpses and with mysterious objects and bubbles and air, breath, life; this living being gives me souvenirs of a different kind – rubbish – as a gift. I receive these gifts in the spirit they were given – with reverence, grateful for the teaching South Cape Bay has offered me.

The following day my daughter and I trek back past the twittering creeks, through wet tea tree groves, along the same windy grass planes, and over the rocks which make my daughter's eyes roll, back to human society at our base camp at Cackle Creek.

Huddled around the camp table, I show our friends my plastic treasures like a child opening her palm to share a newly discovered wonderment with her parents. Like a child who sees a beauty that others are blind to, I have disgusted my friends. I try to tell the story of the autonomous beach who gifted me these treasures, but my plastic gifts are nothing but litter in their eyes – where did it come from, is it the dreaded salmon farm rope? Discarded by fishermen? My friends recall the plastic gyres and seemingly impossible to solve and dangerous faults of humanly habits. These stories speak louder than the subtle whisper of what South Cape Beach has taught me. As their reasoned rage rises, I withdraw to listen to the quiet story my experience tells me. It whispers something that the pipi shell has whispered into my ear for months.

The binaries with which we in the west are usually armed as we approach the natural world nullify our potential to recognise the agency of nature.¹⁷ With these binaries we can label ourselves as the exclusive possessors of intentionality, of creativity, of reason – but what of the rest of the world? What of South Cape Beach, of rocks, of sea froth, of the pipi shell? It is pernicious fiction to believe that these are without their own form of reason. The sort of thinking that attaches these characteristics exclusively to humans has eroded our cultural restraints against harming the world.^{18,19} By eating through the hard shell of our separateness, of wearing it down with the awareness that we are not the exclusive heirs to intentionality, our blinkers are removed, and we can see that we are in excellent company. This is a critical step in recognising our place in the world. Like Plumwood's realisation that her body was perceived as a potential meal by others in the landscape, our hierarchy can be rebuilt to resemble less of a triangle with humans perched precariously at the top, and more of a circle, within which the dance of life can shimmy and foxtrot on and on.

I struggle to find a space within the network of my culture that allows me to co-exist with the natural world authentically. The act of writing allows me to express the dance of sand and rock and flesh;²⁰ onto-poetics sanctions the sharing of a vision of the world which is hidden in plain sight.²¹ I commune with places, but my herbal tea still comes wrapped in plastic. Nonetheless, as the rhythm of my footsteps becomes the path, I continue into the belly of the beast. I am in good company; with the voices of Plumwood, South Cape Beach and the pipi shell ringing in my ears I begin to see the cracks in the monolith of my cultural perceptions. I cannot topple this construction, but the quiet voices of sticks and feathers help me to squeeze through the cracks in its foundation. My daughter walks ahead, her eyes rolling at the difficulty with which I negotiate the confronting habits of my culture. The ease with which she traverses this terrain provides me with the courage to persist in my pilgrimage south.

Notes

1. Leanne Morrison is an accounting PhD candidate at the University of Tasmania. Her research explores the corporate relationship with nature.
2. The South Cape walk is the first leg of the South Coast Track, an 85 km hike through the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area within the Southwest National Park.
3. Val Plumwood, *The Eye of the Crocodile* (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2012).
4. Freya Mathews, "The World Hidden Within the World: a Conversation on Ontopoetics." *The Trumpeter* 23 (2009).
5. Freya Mathews, "Invitation to Ontopoetics," *PAN Philosophy Activism Nature* 6 (2009).
6. Val Plumwood, "Nature in the Active Voice," *Australian Humanities Review* 46 (2009): 113-129.
7. Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. (London: Routledge, 1993).
8. Possibly Phaphies elongate
9. The mouth of Cockle Creek opens into the ocean on the boundary of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area of the Southwest National Park.
10. Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*.
11. Val Plumwood, "Nature, Self, and Gender: Feminism, Environmental Philosophy, and the Critique of Rationalism," *Hypatia* 6, (1991): 3-27
12. Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*.
13. Val Plumwood, "Decolonising Relationships with Nature," *PAN: Philosophy Activism Nature* 2 (2002): 7-30.
14. Plumwood, "Nature in the Active Voice".
15. Mathews, "Invitation to Ontopoetics".
16. Freya Mathews, *The Ecological Self*. (Great Britain: Routledge, 1991).
17. Plumwood, "Nature in the Active Voice".
18. Carolyn Merchant, *The death of nature: women, ecology, and the scientific revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989).
19. Mathews, "Invitation to Ontopoetics".
20. Freya Mathews, "On Desiring Nature," *Indian Journal of Ecocriticism* 11 (2010).
21. Freya Mathews, "An Invitation to Ontopoetics: the Poetic Structure of Being," *Australian Humanities Review* 43 (2007).