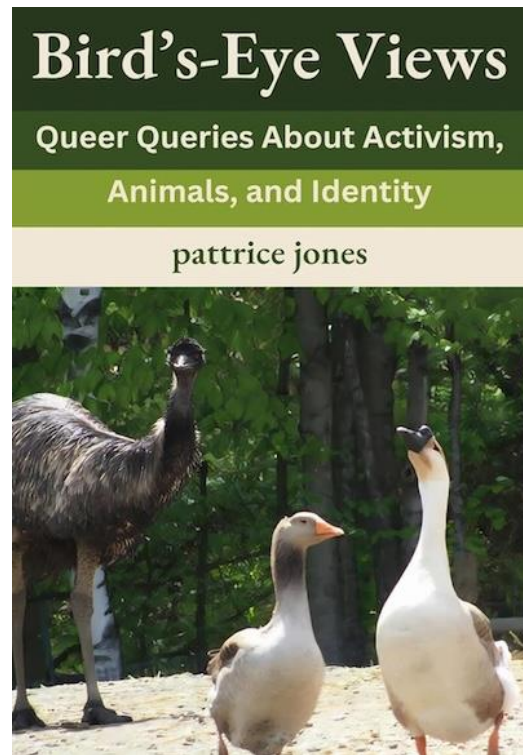


Bird's-Eye Views by pattrice jones

Author interviewed by [Kim Stallwood](#)

April 2024



[Amazon link](#)

pattrice jones is a co-founder of [VINE Sanctuary](#), an LGBTQ-led refuge for farmed animals. A former tenant organizer and anti-racist educator, jones has accumulated more than 40 years of activist experience in peace and justice movements. An internationally recognized ecofeminist theorist, jones has taught college and university courses on the theory and praxis of social change activism as well as on linkages among different forms of injustice. Trained as a clinical psychologist, jones brings heart, mind, rigor, and candor to the challenging questions facing 21st century social movements.

In the Introduction to your book, *Bird's-Eye Views*, you write that ‘Every year, the folly of human supremacy becomes more clear.’ What do you understand to be the ‘folly of human supremacy’?

It's sheer folly for humans to imagine themselves as separate from and superior to the larger-than-human world. We are entirely dependent on it. We don't even fully understand fundamental factors like gravity and photosynthesis. Speciesism not only unfairly denigrates animals and other nonhumans but also tells us lies about ourselves. We are, the story goes, supremely intelligent beings who rightly rule the world by our abilities. We are clever bumbler whose collective behavior has brought the planet to an era of cascading collapses of ecosystems. Wildfires, floods, droughts, and other derangements menace everyone. Among ourselves, problems like warfare, poverty, inequality, man-made famines, and genocide, persist despite the prolonged best efforts of some of the best-educated and influential people on the planet. At present, we have reached a crisis point in our collective ability to even agree with each other about what reality might be.



patrice jones

Most of the humans who have been trying to solve problems among humans, and even those who have been trying to solve environmental problems, have done so within an implicit stance of human supremacy. We've seen how that's worked out. It's time to try something new. I believe by stepping down from our self-constructed pillars and looking around, we can learn things that we need to know about ourselves. This will help to solve the problems we've created for each other and the wider world.

You're a longstanding activist and scholar who has written about the social justice issues you've engaged with. You write that you've had to sometimes 'rethink everything I thought I knew.' What are the most important lessons you take away from your work?

It's the willingness to rethink everything, and the ability to do so, that may be the most important lesson. One reader said that, over the course of reading the book, she felt like she was learning to think afresh. So, I think that, more importantly than any of the specific lessons in specific chapters, the book, as a whole, models a way of becoming better able to think differently.

My hope is that, by following along as I imagine myself into various points of view, taking a wide array of material facts into account, readers will become better able to do the same. Along the way, they will learn many things about anarchism, and surrealism, and human psychology—not to mention birds of many kinds—along with a host of other topics. But the overall effect will be to become better able to join what I call 'the worldwide resistance against humdrum human hegemony' by both analysing situations more comprehensively and by routinely tuning in to the larger-than-human world.

The essays in your book are thematically arranged with introductions. The focus of the first group 'adopts an avian point of view.' What is an avian point of view?

There are many different avian points of view. Pigeons perceive the world from very different vantage points than emus. Each has unique vantage points from which to observe and critique the doings of humans. In each of the chapters in that section, I challenge myself to imagine such viewpoints, hoping to learn from them. When I ask myself how pigeons might parse capitalism or what emus might have to say about colonialism, I arrive at different questions than humans usually ask themselves.

This takes the feminist ideas known as Standpoint Theory and extends them into the larger-than-human world. In brief, that theory notes that what you can perceive depends on where you stand and suggests

that those at the margins may be able to see things that those in more powerful positions cannot. I believe that, just as we cannot begin to understand economic inequality without consulting people living in poverty, we cannot begin to understand human exploitation of animals and their habitats without at least doing our level best to imagine what animals would tell us about that if they could.

Working and living at a sanctuary, as I have done for more than 20 years now, I have often had the experience of seeing myself through the eyes of other animals. Over time, this has led me to a way of looking at humans as just one kind of animal among many. How can we learn about that animal, when our own perceptions of ourselves have been structured by presumptions of human supremacy? Perhaps because of my experiences at the sanctuary, I have sometimes been able to slip aside from my capital-H 'Human' identity and catch glimpses of us as we might be viewed by other animals. In several of the essays in the book, I deliberately build on those glimpses in ways that readers have found both fascinating and illustrative.

The subtitle of your book is *Queer Queries About Activism, Animals, and Identity*. You see, I believe, an integrated portfolio of social justice that demands our attention. Why is achieving social justice so difficult?

The easiest answer to that question is that people fight back when you try to take away their privileges. Many men, for example, would prefer not to cede the numerous advantages of maleness within patriarchal societies. Sometimes the resistance is subtle, and other times overt. Groups of powerful people, such as armies or corporations, are particularly well-situated to push back against progressive change, but even everyday people can inhibit or impede change by persisting in past patterns of belief or behavior. This is sometimes because they feel threatened by the change but may also be because they cannot imagine other ways of being in the world.

Another reason that social justice seems to remain always out of reach is that so much injustice is structural. By this, I mean that biases of various sorts are baked into the social and economic systems that evolved in the context of overt inequality. Even when many or most individuals within those systems have forsworn overt racism or sexism or other biases, discrimination may persist unless affirmative efforts are made to restructure the systems.

Next comes failures of analysis. It's challenging to think at the level of systems rather than individuals. The challenges mount when different forms of systemic oppression interact with each other in complicated ways. In the book, I recommend what I call an 'eco-logical' way of approaching whatever problem you are trying to solve. This way of thinking draws upon the work of antiracist and feminist theorists who have illustrated the intersections among various forms of social injustice, extending that by also taking wider ecologies into account.

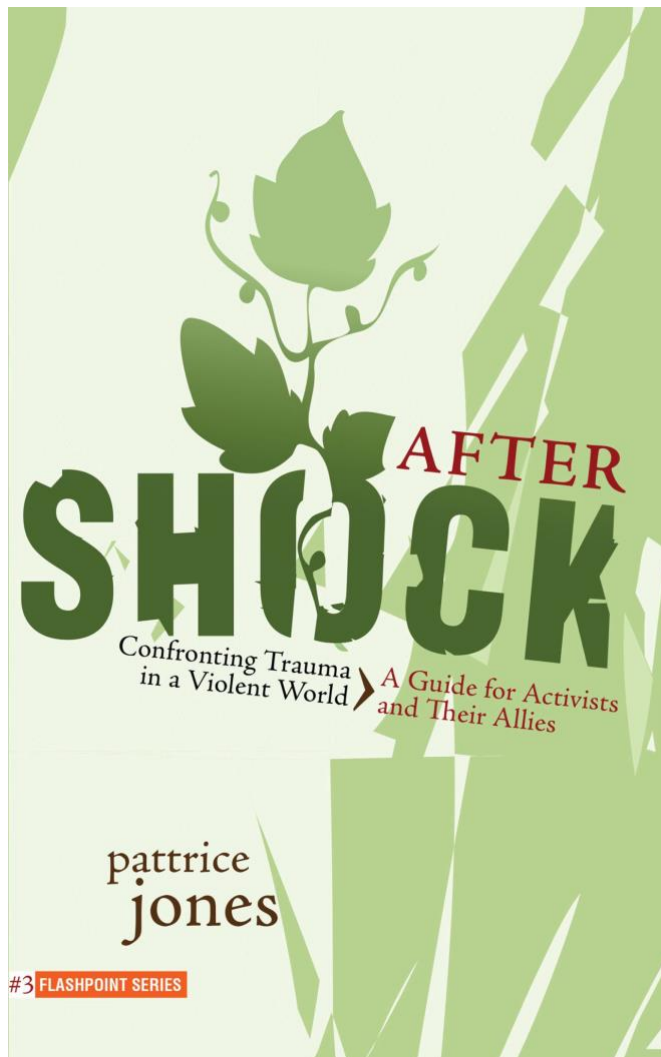
Over the years, we have learned from biologists and other ecologists how changes in one system can create effects in another, even when the connection between them is not immediately evident. Smoke from a factory might end up changing the underwater ecology of a pond several miles away. Many of our most urgent current emergencies arose specifically because human beings didn't anticipate the effects of their actions on systems.

This brings us back to the folly of human supremacy. Again, speciesism not only tells lies about animals but also confuses us about what sort of animal humans might be. Presuming those myths about people to be true, activists of all sorts use strategies that are based on misconceptions about human beings. Presuming themselves and other people to be the supremely rational beings of myth, activists often rely too heavily on rational argumentation, failing to adequately account for emotion and situation as drivers

of human behavior. Learning to see ourselves and each other more accurately will enhance the accuracy of our analyses of problems and allow us to devise more realistic strategies for change.

What advice would you give to yourself if you were to imagine starting on the road to social justice?

It's all about relationships. The aim of your work is to help people be in better relationships with each other, other animals, and the larger-than-human world. You cannot do this alone.



Your relationships with comrades will be infinitely precious, both practically and psychologically. Nurture them however you can. Never allow disagreements about tactics or analyses to break your bonds with people who are themselves wholeheartedly pursuing the same aims as you are. Mindfully extend care to those with whom you work closely, remembering that they are whole people who have struggles of their own. Do the same, insofar as you have the time and energy to do so, with those in your wider activist network.

Everyone you meet is a potential comrade or ally. Be as kind and generous as you can in every encounter, not only because this is the right thing to do but also because you never know when that bank clerk, neighbor, or classmate will be in a position to tell you something you need to know.

Cultivate a diverse network of comrades, friends, and friendly acquaintances. Besides being good for your own overall health, a vibrant community gives you access to many different points of view from which to consider the problems you are working to solve.

Work hard to understand those problems from all angles. Don't get so attached to any particular analysis that you become unable to consider equally valid hypotheses. Ruthlessly revisit what you think you know, wondering what you might be missing.

Take a trial-and-error approach to activism itself. Consider every action or campaign an experiment. That way, you won't feel so vested in whatever tactics you choose that you become unable to change course if they prove to be ineffective. Consider every failure a learning opportunity.

Because failure will be so frequent, bolster your morale by doing some things that surely will produce some short-term good, even while your long-term aims remain remote.

Remember who you were before you learned certain things, even if you feel queasy remembering what you used to think or do. This will make you better able to persuade those who still think or do the things you now shun. This will also remind you that people *can* change. You did!

Remember, too, that you are not alone. All around the world, whether you know them or not, people are doing their own very best to create the same change you seek. Have faith in them, and do your best to be worthy of the faith they place in you.

It's not only people, in the sense of humans, who are working in the same direction. If what you are doing is consistent with what the world as a whole needs, then you will have the wind at your back in the sense that multitudinous beings are also doing whatever they can to bring things back into balance by restoring healthy relationships.

Finally, I would tell my young queer self to tap into eros to fuel this challenging but rewarding work. Feel that wish for full and nourishing relationships that lives within us all. Let it drive everything you do. Call to it in others, and you will find them more responsive to whatever you are trying to do.