

Prelude 2.

Debbie and Yarralin: The Early Years

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Debbie came from the USA to Australia in July 1980 to carry out PhD research into, as she put it, 'Aboriginal identity'. At the time, her plan was to find a community with a strong traditional culture, remain there for a year and then return to the USA. After a week or so with friends in Sydney she arrived at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (now the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, or AIATSIS) in Canberra, which was partly funding her research. This is where we first met.

Debbie's first attempt to find a field location was to contact the Mowanjum community, near Derby in Western Australia, but her request to carry out research there was denied. This was, of course, a great disappointment, so I sat with her and went through what I knew, from firsthand experience or hearsay, about Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory. Some were located in very harsh desert environments. Others had long been influenced by missions, which tended to weaken or modify traditional culture. Yet others were close to a town or roadhouse and consequently endured severe alcohol problems. Many had a combination of these influences and problems.

My recommendation to Debbie was Yarralin, a community on Victoria River Downs Station where I had worked on sacred sites' documentation in 1975 and on land claims in 1977. The location was a long way from the nearest town and had never had mission activity. It had wonderful scenery, rich biodiversity and large natural waters, and the people were friendly and culturally strong. A friend, Ros Fraser, told her then partner, Jack Doolan,

about Debbie and her search for a field location, and mentioned Yarralin as a possibility. Jack was the Member for Victoria River in the Northern Territory Legislative Assembly and had been actively involved in the establishment of Yarralin community in the 1970s. On Debbie's behalf Jack spoke with Yarralin community leaders, and their response was positive.

Debbie arrived at Yarralin in September 1980 where she was warmly welcomed and given a house to live in. This 'house', the same as was lived in by most community members, consisted of a concrete-floored, corrugated iron-clad shed, with a verandah, a single power point and a tap in the yard. Showers and other facilities were communal and all cooking was done on an open fire. Initially, a constant stream of Yarralin men came to Debbie and began to teach her their culture—mythology, ecological knowledge, kinship system and language—and their history and life stories. Many of them politely suggested that, if she wanted, she could come and stay in their camp. Debbie equally politely declined their invitation, telling them she already had a husband.

Interestingly, nearly a year passed before the Yarralin women began seriously to interact with Debbie. They told her that they thought she would find the climate and living conditions too hard and wouldn't stay long, so there was little point in establishing relationships with her. Eventually, Debbie formed strong and ongoing relationships with many of the women.

Some of Debbie's teachers, both men and women, had grown up in the bush. Others grew up in station 'blacks' camps'. All had been on walkabout in the wet seasons, foraging for food and learning about Dreaming sites. All had been observers and participants in ceremonial life. In the case of men, most had been stockmen, mustering cattle all over the stations and in the process learning the location and significance of Dreaming places from older men. In other words, all of Debbie's teachers were strong in the 'Law', possessed of deep knowledge of ceremony, mythology, the location and significance of Dreaming sites, and all other aspects of traditional culture.

I joined Debbie in Yarralin in November 1980. My self-appointed role was to provide backup—to collect firewood, to drive and navigate on forays into the bush or to other communities, to photograph community life and to help Debbie gain an understanding of the local creole, geography, settler history and wildlife. This enabled her to fully concentrate on learning from Yarralin people and to fully immerse herself in community life, including participation in ritual events. It didn't take long for Debbie to realise that

her original plan to stay for 12 months was grossly inadequate; we were in Yarralin for nearly two years and later spent other prolonged periods there, working on a number of regional land claims, helping register sacred sites with the Northern Territory Sacred Sites Authority (now the Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority, or AAPA), and on other research projects.

From Debbie's initial research and later projects came her prize-winning books, *Dingo Makes Us Human* and *Hidden Histories*, the first two of a planned trilogy. The third is this volume, *Dreaming Ecology*. The book reveals the extraordinarily dense and complex interconnections, rights and responsibilities that ordered life in the traditional Aboriginal world, and the philosophical and cosmological underpinnings of these relationships—between people and the natural world, between one Aboriginal group and another, and relationships between different species and/or natural phenomena.

To Australia's great benefit Debbie's initial plan to return to America after 12 months' field research never eventuated. She instead became an Australian citizen and spent the rest of her life here. Her passing is a major loss to this country, but her numerous writings dedicated to social and ecological justice, and to helping bridge the gap between Aboriginal and settler Australians, are an ongoing gift to this country, and to the wider world.

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February 2023

This text is taken from *Dreaming Ecology: Nomadics and Indigenous Ecological Knowledge, Victoria River, Northern Australia*, by Deborah Bird Rose, edited by Darrell Lewis and Margaret Jolly, published 2024 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.