

Prelude 4.

Dreaming Ecology: Reflections

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Process

In the months before she died in December 2018, Debbie Bird Rose expressed her desire to her daughter Chantal Jackson that *Dreaming Ecology* might be published. This would complete her envisaged trilogy, based on her long-term experiences with the Yarralin mob, to follow her earlier widely celebrated works, *Hidden Histories* (1991) and *Dingo Makes Us Human* (1992). Based on years of research commencing in 1980–82 with many return visits, the manuscript had substantially been completed in 2003. But she knew that there were still parts that she wanted to elaborate, a full set of references to be finished and maps, figures and photos to be located, inserted and finessed. During those last years and months, Debbie was preoccupied with other work, her book *Shimmer* (2022) and several other studies in environmental humanities and extinction studies as her own strong life force started to ebb.¹

In July 2021, in the midst of a cold pandemic winter in Canberra, I received an email from Chantal asking me if I might be involved in helping to shepherd the manuscript to publication. I was honoured to be asked since I had long been an admirer of Debbie's work—as an anthropologist who

1 For cognate arguments see Rose (1991, 1992, 1996, 1997, 1998, 2000a, 2000b, 2004, 2022). The most up-to-date curriculum vitae for Debbie that we have found is at the following link: unsw.academia.edu/DeborahRose/CurriculumVitae, accessed 5 March 2023. Also see the Wikipedia entry, 'Deborah Bird Rose', Wikipedia, last edited 6 May 2023, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deborah_Bird_Rose, accessed 17 August 2023. See also the fine obituaries by Stephen Muecke (2020) and Eben Kirksey (2021).

had been deeply engaged with the Indigenous Australians she had lived and worked with, who practised not a form of evanescent ethnography which extracted data from ‘informants’ but a person who listened deeply and respectfully to her ‘teachers’, who celebrated the depth of Indigenous Australian philosophy and who nourished lifetime connections in struggles against the ravages of colonialism to regain Country which had sustained an Indigenous life for 65,000 years.

When I first read *Dreaming Ecology* I found its breadth and depth breathtaking. But I explained to Chantal that, although as a feminist scholar researching gender and the climate crisis in the Pacific, I might have the scholarly background and passion to help bring this important work to fruition, I could not conceivably do this alone. I had not walked on Country in the Victoria River District, I did not know its people, I was not fluent in Aboriginal languages and had not been engaged with the scholarly debates swirling around Indigenous Australian ecological knowledge and practice. So, we would need to find a willing co-editor.

We found that in Darrell Lewis—Chantal’s father, Debbie’s long-term partner for 27 years during which they lived and worked with the mobs at Yarralin, Lingara and Pigeon Hole. Darrell introduced Debbie to this Country and is a published author of many books on the rock art, environmental changes and the history of pastoralism of Northern Australia.² Despite the emotional challenges of their separation later in life and Debbie’s subsequent death, Darrell wholeheartedly agreed to be involved. Most of the rigorous textual work of verifying references, adding explanatory interpellations to long quotes in North Australian Kriol and Aboriginal Pastoral English and sourcing the bio-eco maps and figures from Debbie’s archives in the Northern Territory, has been his. He collaborated with Karina Pelling of CartoGIS at The Australian National University to fine-tune the maps of the region and the bio-eco maps Debbie created with her teachers. I assisted with some elusive references, resolved complex issues of overlap and duplication arising from successive drafts, added some notes and changed some lingering Americanisms to Australian style. For the most part we have tried to amplify Debbie’s original voice, resisting updates and corrections and giving you as reader a sense of how she might have finished and finessed this book if she had been given more time.

2 Some of his major works are listed in the references: Lewis (1988, 1996, 2002, 2007, 2012) and with Rose (1988) and with Schulz (1995).

From our first editorial meetings, Darrell showed me a gallery of exquisite photos he had taken of Indigenous people and of Country which complement the text in graphic ways. Debbie had planned for many of these photos to be an integral part of her book's design. By publishing both digitally and in hard copy with ANU Press we are able to include a wide range of these photographs, most of which are in full colour, and to add a gallery of these in a linked website. The fact that all of this is online and free to download realises our strong desire, and that of Debbie, to give this book back to the Yarralin mob. Almost all of Debbie's most important teachers have now passed back into Country. As I write, only Allan Young is still living. But, while deeply mindful of the Indigenous protocols about names and images of those who have passed, we see *Dreaming Ecology* not just as a reciprocal gift from Debbie, but from one generation to another. A return in every sense.

Ancient practices, prescient insights

It explores a holistic understanding of the interconnections of people, country, kinship, creation and the living world within a context of mobility. Implicitly it asks how people lived so sustainably for so long.

This is how, in 2003, Debbie distilled the significance of *Dreaming Ecology* in a prospectus for publishers and readers. The book celebrates the depth of Indigenous understanding both in the sense of philosophical profundity, but also in terms of the temporal depth of Indigenous knowledge and practice, now known to extend over 65,000 years. But it also offers insights for white settlers, those of us who first occupied Australia from 1788, insights which are prescient given the escalation of the climate crisis, the conversation about the Voice to Parliament in Australia and for the scholarly field of environmental humanities which Debbie helped to create and sustain.

It is hard to distil the core insights of a book bursting with innovative ethnographic and theoretical ideas, but in these reflections, I focus on five themes that Debbie develops in the course of *Dreaming Ecology*: footwalk epistemology, totemism, 'wild' Country and 'double death', absence/presence, and creation and return.

Footwalk epistemology

As in much of her writing, Debbie offers a grounded and embodied sense of place.³ Especially in the opening passages reflecting on her long walks across Country with Jessie Wirrpa we can feel the red dirt on her soles, light moving in diurnal and seasonal rhythms, the searing heat of the dry season and swirling dust storms, the torrential flooding rains of the wet, rivers filling and drying out, the changing sensation of winds. Country is alive with the sounds and traces of other creatures—insects, birds, snakes and lizards, kangaroos, turtles, fish. Their presence and calls speak to each other and to humans—telling when plants come into flower and seed, when fish are moving, and where there is an abundance of bush tucker and bush medicine. Humans who pay attention in a full-bodied, multi-sensorial way can hear the messages of Country, alive with far more than a human presence and sentience (Chapter 2, 63–64). Indigenous Australians can now move across Country in trucks and cars, but they celebrate ‘footwalking’: the feeling of feet moving over the ground, the movement of breath and wind, climbing across hot sandstone, pausing at billabongs and springs, sensing characteristic smells, the prickly brush of spinifex, the bites of ants and mosquitoes and all the resonating sounds of life.

As Debbie walks with Jessie and with several other teachers (including Dora Jilpngarri, Snowy Kulmilya, Kitty Lariyari Dadada and Hobbles Danaiyarri), she charts their extraordinarily detailed knowledge of this more-than-human world (see Chapter 3). She records and maps the zones of their walking, which animals and plants are present and which have been lost by the impacts of white settler pastoralists and those ‘four-legged soldiers in the army of conquest’ (Rose 2004, 86); cattle, whose hard hooves trample many edible native grasses into extinction and degrade the soil, creating eroded gullies and riverbanks. Still, Debbie takes a ‘short walk with cattle’ too. She reveals how the lives of the Yarralin mob have been remade with large pastoral stations like Victoria River Downs—where men were employed as stockmen, women primarily as domestic labourers in hard, corralled labour regimes, fed on meagre rations of flour, beef, sugar and tea. And when the wet made station work impossible, the mob was released

3 The centrality of walking in both Indigenous and settler stories about the Red Centre is explored in a book by Glenn Morrison (2017). He sees walking as a deeply cultural, even political, act and offers a comparative and cross-cultural analysis of six texts, which share a foundation in place-making through walking and writing. I thank Richard Davis for this reference.

to go ‘walkabout’, find bush tucker and celebrate through ceremony. This imposed colonial seasonality eclipsed Indigenous rhythms whereby the time of abundance just after the wet season was the time for large regional rituals.

But, although Indigenous Australians may have playfully seen this time of ‘walkabout’ as like a holiday from hard work and constant white surveillance, this was the antithesis of the white Australian myth of ‘walkabout’ as aimless wandering. Debbie stresses how Indigenous nomadism is a highly purposive movement across an animated Country, responding to the ‘call of others’, following sites of abundance as seeds, berries and fruits ripened, bush creatures like kangaroos and goannas offered good game for hunting and fish, turtles and crocodiles were surging in rivers and estuaries. Debbie dismisses the idea that Indigenous Australians, labelled as ‘hunter-gatherers’, were ‘parasites’ on an inert nature. Rather she emphasises the symbiosis of species and how humans exercised sensitive control over other beings, for instance storing seed from foraging, through fish trapping and what Rhys Jones provocatively called ‘fire-stick farming’ (Jones 1969).

This pervasive practice entailed a highly controlled burning of vegetation—creating open grasslands so that game could be more easily hunted, sustaining plant harvests, preserving refugia-like forests for people and animals and promoting fire-sensitive vegetation like acacia. Rainforests and sacred sites were never burnt. There was likely an aesthetic element to this burning—creating clarity and openness and an ecological mosaic. Drawing on the insights of her teacher April Bright, Debbie stressed the diversity of controlled burning regimes: hot and cold burns, in big winds and slow winds. Before lighting a fire, it was critical to know where the fire would stop. Rainfall, vegetation and landforms determined which was the best season—in the northern flood plains the appearance of yellowing grass was the signal to start burning towards the end of the wet season; in the monsoonal tropics it was from April through to June when the long grass was still green; in the desert, burning could be throughout the year, although the hot summer months were avoided (see Rose 1995). There was a responsibility to burn one’s own Country, but white settlers often tried to prohibit such burning, seeing fire as a threat to themselves, cattle and station homesteads (Chapter 7, 240–41). The consequences of such prohibitions are palpable in escalating bushfires across the Australian continent (see Gammage 2012). Debbie celebrated the slow acceptance of Indigenous Australian methods of burning by Anglo-Australian land managers and this has grown since the time of her writing and especially after the uncontrolled horrific bushfires of our Black Summer of 2019–20.

Totemism: The kinship of more-than-human

Integral to such Indigenous practices of caring for Country was an affirmation of kinship which was more-than-human. This has been dubbed 'totemism'. Debbie laments the inadequacy of stock anthropological analyses of totemic creatures as 'good to eat' (Malinowski 1948) or 'good to think' (Lévi-Strauss 1963). Functionalist and structuralist interpretations alike are still predicated on western binaries of human/non-human, nature/culture. Debbie offers both a polemical critique of her anthropological ancestors and a perspective on totemism which is far more nuanced and fluid. To quote just a few words of her compelling critique:

These questions mattered to people who believed themselves to be fundamentally different from both animals and savages. Their project had the happy benefit of refitting under a new paradigm a set of distinctions that were both foundational and self-serving. Civilisation was marked by a separation of culture from nature, so it was said, and it followed from this that a world view which posited intimate physical relations between people and animals must be understood as an absence of civilisation and must therefore constitute an evolutionary stage at which humans were not separated from nature. (Chapter 4, 150)

Fundamental to Indigenous concepts and practices of totemism is that lack of separation between nature and culture, between human and non-human. The kinship relations between humans are mirrored in the relations of plants; some are brothers, but most are cross-cousins or matrilineal kin (both called 'mates'). Debbie highlights how the Indigenous sense of ecology is one of connectivity and mutual benefit in place (Chapter 7). Her teachers especially emphasised responsible relations—that human beings are not in an extractive relation to 'resources' but have a responsibility to ensure the abundance of all other life into the future. She is critical of natural resource management (NRM) as perpetuating an extractive relation to nature as 'resources' and promoting an 'unsustainable separation of nature and culture' with disastrous long-term consequences (Chapter 8, 278). Moreover, Indigenous relations between humans and non-humans are not siloed in boxes like the bounded totemic clans of functionalist theory. They are not predicated on atomistic western thought whereby a person is a singularity, whose boundaries are coterminous with a body: 'the person achieves their maturity and integrity through relationships with people, animals, Country

and Dreamings' (Chapter 4, 158). Genres of people and other creatures crosscut and overlap, emplaced both in dwelling and in movement across Country, again creating a mosaic pattern (Chapter 3, 138ff, 34, 38).

'Wild' Country and 'double death'

The idea of 'wild Country' expressed by many of Debbie's teachers, laments the loss of such responsible relations in caring for Country. Hobbles Danaiyarri observed: 'before *kartiya* [whitefellas], blackfellas bin just walking around organising the Country' (Chapter 3, 83). We can hear in this an implicit critique that whitefellas have been disorganising the Country—white settlement and dispossession has led to degradation and devastation, to the Country becoming 'wild'. Many of Debbie's teachers like Dora Jilpngarri, Doug Campbell, Riley Young and Old Jimmy talk about how cattle have caused the loss of water, with rivers receding and becoming shallower, and a host of edible plants diminishing or disappearing altogether—yams, seed-bearing plants and bulbs and parsley-like plants that grew around springs and billabongs. Bandicoots, bilbies, brush-tail possums and 'native cats' have all disappeared. These absent animals are the totemic relations of living people 'but the animals themselves, the non-human descendants of the ancestral totemic figure, are gone' (Chapter 8, 271).

Ecological devastation is graphically visible in many photos by Darrell Lewis. Massive erosion, desiccated riverbanks, rivers blocked with silt, billabongs and springs without water and lilies, soils turned into scald areas, trees struggling to survive, noxious weeds like rubber bush and devil's claw invading—we can clearly see all this. But much devastation is also invisible—the absence of previously abundant creatures, the extinction of several species—documented not just by scientific surveys but in the full-bodied memories and recollections of Debbie's teachers in Chapter 4. And as Debbie stresses, 'losses ramify destructively'. The loss of eucalypt trees is a loss of food for flying foxes and native bees, homes for arboreal marsupials and ultimately loss of food, firewood and medicine for people (Chapter 1, 46).

In dialogue with these Indigenous testimonies of loss, Debbie developed the notion of 'double death'. I quote:

Death, as we know, occurs when the spark of life flickers out or departs. In a system of life that is seriously alive, death is worked back into the fabric of life ... Double death breaks up this process,

so that death leads to more death. Loss, destruction, extinctions: double death invades systems of life, undermining their capacity to sustain the relationships that enable people, organisms, or larger systems such as Country, to be seriously alive. (Chapter 1, 49–50)

The death of a person, like Debbie's dear teacher Jessie Wirrpa, means that she returns to her Country as a nurturing spiritual presence, in a recursive looping between life and death. Once a great hunter, she is now a provider, part of the nourishing ecology of place. But double death has also come to Jessie's Country—the destruction of the capacity of life to turn death into more life. It encompasses settler violence towards Indigenous people, massacres, sometimes with entire clans eradicated, ecocidal and cultural devastation, loss of Country and its abundance, loss of languages and Indigenous knowledge. Double death puts Jessie and her kin in double jeopardy.

Absence/presence

As well as plumbing the depths of Indigenous philosophies of life and death, Debbie counterpoints and contrasts them with an array of western philosophies, including Christian and Judaic notions of the divine. In contrast to the prevalent idea of God as an unseen or absent presence, Indigenous divinity emplaced in Dreaming tracks is an immanent presence. A dominant strand in Christianity speaks of separation—Adam and Eve are banished from the Garden of Eden and from the daily presence of God. God came down to Earth again in the body of his son Jesus. He was crucified, but after resurrection his body and spirit ascended to heaven, creating for the faithful a sense of haunting loss. Thus, many Christians see this world as 'fallen', a material world of lesser value than the transcendent spiritual world. After ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood (1990), Debbie observes how Plato's philosophies similarly elevated the ideal world over the real, the transcendent spirit over the body. Such western theologies and philosophies are saturated with a sense of separation and of loss, and often a longing to close the ontological chasm and return to a unitary state of being. Especially in the post-Holocaust West—the 'what-is' of the world is seen as a 'broken and wounded terrain of catastrophe and risk' (Chapter 2, 72). Today, we might add that in this epoch of intensifying climate crisis, a global pandemic and renewed threats of nuclear war, dystopian visions of a damaged planet are even more pervasive.

The Indigenous notion of presence, in stark contrast to dominant western philosophies, is always emplaced and particular, located in living beings and places. To be present is to be in relation to another in intersubjectivities engaging not just humans, but more-than-human presences, other creatures and Dreamings. Dreaming ancestors created a cosmogony of movement, the traces of which guide contemporary movements. In everyday and ritual work, the flourishing of ephemeral life is ensured. The 'perduring life of creation' (Chapter 2, 73), the Dreaming, is thus actualised in the present. Debbie does not romanticise this Indigenous philosophy of divine flourishing—drought and floods, scarcity and hunger are integral presences too. But the underlying vision unites human and non-human, body and spirit, ideal and real.

A dance with time: Creation and return

In her final chapter Debbie highlights how ecological time and individual time are sequential and irreversible; a living creature comes into the world, lives and dies, children follow parents. But Indigenous concepts of the Dreaming see creation as linked to place and ongoing. 'It is not sequential, irreversible or unbounded, but rather is the continuous happening of emerging life' (Chapter 9, 283). So, when a person dies, one spirit returns to Country and takes care of the living while another flows into ecological time 'reborn either directly as a new person, or indirectly through animals to human personhood' (Chapter 9, 283). The dead keep returning to life. Again, in conversation with Val Plumwood, Debbie contrasts this with western tendencies to either resist death, see death as sacrifice or redeem life through the passage to an afterworld which is not of this world. The relation between life and death is configured as a battle where death triumphs. For Indigenous people of the Victoria River region, life not death has the last word. The bones of past people bind them to Country, and life re-emerges from Country as babies are born.

Debbie reviews the decades of anthropological debate about Indigenous understandings of human conception and discerns there a 'perverse tenacity' in such scholarship seeking to unlock secret business unavailable as public knowledge. Without trespassing into the terrain of secret knowledge, she sees the bringing forth of life as the work of both men and women in relation to sources of life in Country. 'Dreaming Women left unborn babies at various sites in their travels. These are the repositories of future generations' (Chapter 9, 289). An unborn baby seeking life leaps into an

animal, the father kills that animal and gives food to the mother, who then realises she is pregnant. Baby spirits move into the nurturing womb and are born onto the ground in the mother's blood. So, Hobbles Danaiyarri was a barramundi, whom his father speared and gave to his mother to eat, so that the spirit became a baby who is now the man Hobbles. He had a small mark on his right temple where his father speared the fish. Years before, the barramundi was born from the spirit of an Aboriginal man who was killed by white men while fishing near Wave Hill (Chapter 9, 291).

Dreaming Women walked across the land, menstruated, conceived and gave birth—and their menstrual and birthing blood soaked into the land and created sites of great power and danger. Many of these sites are red ochre deposits, some belonging to women, some belonging to men, but exclusively of that Country. Debbie observes how menstrual blood in the West is often seen as a threat to the masculinist ideal of a unitary, controlled individual body—it is wet, leaky and uncontrolled and needs to be secreted or contained in the body by tampons. By contrast, in Indigenous conception women's blood is seen as sacred and potent, named and visible. Its porosity is celebrated. Since flesh is shared across species, a woman's body is shared with the bodies of other persons, other living things and Country. Blood flowing outside the body is a sign of permeability and connection, not loss. Menstrual blood is a sign of potential fertility, eliciting love and lust; unless properly managed it can make men 'wild'. Significantly, Debbie notes that in pre-colonial Australia, women experienced far fewer menstrual periods, with the late onset of menstruation and long periods of lactation and, especially in the desert and during periods of drought or famine, amenorrhoea (absence of menstrual periods) due to body fat falling below the critical threshold. This rarity perhaps intensified the potency of menstrual blood. In the past women birthed on the ground and their blood connected their person to Country. The umbilical cord and placenta connecting mother and baby was treated with care and the baby was rubbed with soil and ashes (which darkened its skin and helped resist the colonial removal of babies with mixed ancestry). The Earth itself is as a mother, its holes and caves wombs (Chapter 9, 298).

In ritual men let their own blood flow; a release of the potent blood of the Dreaming Women. Debbie criticises those analysts who see this as a symbolic appropriation of women's reproductive power, seeing men and women not in opposition but in complementary procreative relations, in shared responsibility for new life. Blood of all kinds—menstrual, birthing, arm blood, penis blood, red ochre—is powerful and transformative'

(Chapter 9, 297). Debbie acknowledges this is dangerous territory and she stresses that such knowledge—both public and undeclared—should be treated with respect and care.

Debbie concludes her book with a reflection on how Indigenous ceremony brings Dreaming power and presence into the time, place and bodies of the performers. She is here in conversation with ethnomusicologist Cath Ellis (1984; see also Rose 2000a) who suggested that complex patterns in the timing of music mesh into a perfected totality—which lift up Dreamings from the Earth in cosmogonic action. In the intervals between there are spontaneous joking episodes. Debbie extends Ellis's analysis from song to dance—as the body connects to the Earth the Earth propels your voice into the night sky: 'You are dancing the Earth, and the Earth is dancing you' (Chapter 9, 302). As background and foreground flip in song and dance, an iridescence is created, 'an exultant awareness of life in action' (Chapter 9, 303). The bodies of the dancers are painted with earth and the designs of Country and of animals they are experiencing in daily life. The ephemeral character of everyday life and the enduring character of the potency of Dreamings in ceremony create the dance of time. 'The ephemeral calls up the enduring ... in new waves of patterned life' (Chapter 9, 305).

The afterlife of *Dreaming Ecology*: A return?

The potency and poignancy of these words is amplified by the fact of Debbie's own death and the deaths of most of her teachers whom we get to know through this book and many other writings by Debbie. I now reflect on the 20 years since Debbie last worked on this manuscript. Much has happened during that time to strengthen my sense that this book was prescient.

First, I focus on how this book might be situated in the world of scholarship—not just the anthropology of Indigenous Australia but the broader terrain of ecological humanities. One of the most robust public debates in recent time has been the critique of Indigenous author Bruce Pascoe's⁴ nationally acclaimed *Dark Emu* (2014) by anthropologist Peter

4 Bruce Pascoe has diverse Indigenous links to Yuin (NSW), Bunurong (Victoria) and Palawa (Tasmania) peoples.

Sutton and archaeologist Keryn Walshe (2021). I do not enter the details of that debate, which risked becoming hostage to polarising ‘culture wars’ in Australia. There have been a number of excellent contributions by Indigenous and non-Indigenous authors (e.g. Davis 2020, 2021; Griffiths 2019; Norman 2021; Rowse 2021). Pascoe graciously welcomed the book as contributing to a discussion of First Nations history (McKenna 2021b).⁵

In *Dreaming Ecology*, Debbie does not endorse the idea that Indigenous Australians were cultivators but through the knowledge and the practice of her teachers she shows the complexity of hunter-gathering life, its highly purposive character, responding to the rhythms of life and controlling and sustaining life through the controlled use of fire and ‘holding’ Country by ensuring the sustainability of other species in symbiotic connectivities. Her teachers’ perspectives on this embraced material and spiritual dimensions in a holistic ethos of life. Yet, she does not resile from revealing the scars of the ‘lash of colonisation’. She shows in graphic detail the ecological devastation consequent on white settlement—how massacres, dispossession and the arrival of cattle transformed Country; many species became rare or extinct, water became scarce and the seasonal rhythms of Indigenous life were profoundly disrupted. The commitment to the enduring power and presence of Dreamings thus emerges as a defiant resistance to how Country has become ‘wild’. Moreover, she shows how Eurocentric binaries which separated nature from culture (utterly foreign to Indigenous ontology) underlay imperialist evolutionary schema which separated hunter-gatherers from cultivators on the alleged march of human progress. This difference was of course foundational for the white myth of terra nullius in Australia.

Although she did not align herself in this way, Debbie’s ethnography resonates with what has been called the ‘ontological turn’ in anthropology, associated with the works of Roy Wagner and Marilyn Strathern in Papua New Guinea and Philippe Descola and Viveiros de Castro in the Amazon, all of which challenged western binaries between nature and culture.⁶ Although some have seen this as a radical rupture in anthropology, some

5 Mark McKenna, historian and author of *Return to Uluru* (2021a), a searing history of frontier violence, points to the attacks both on the person of Pascoe and his book *Dark Emu* by several right-wing commentators in Australia, including Andrew Bolt on *Sky News Media*. He observed: ‘The destructive grip of the culture wars—in which denigration, public shaming or abuse—makes it difficult to grasp this moment for what it truly is: an opportunity to deepen Australians’ knowledge of our Indigenous cultures’ (2021b). A thought-provoking documentary by the Australian Broadcasting Commission, *The Dark Emu Story*, screened from 18 July 2023, engages deeply with the debate.

6 Some of their work includes Roy Wagner (1975, 1986); Marilyn Strathern (1988); Philippe Descola (1994); Descola and Lloyd (2013); Viveiros de Castro (1992); and de Castro and Danowski (2016).

argue that this is continuous with the dormant potential in all anthropology for self-conscious reflexivity, experimentation and openness to challenge the presumptions, the ontologies of ‘what is’ in one’s own culture and indeed the anthropological discipline (see Holbraad and Pedersen 2017).

Dreaming Ecology similarly challenges that entrenched western binary of nature and culture. Significantly, this was initiated from the 1980s and 1990s by feminist anthropologists like Carol MacCormack and Marilyn Strathern (1980) and Donna Haraway (1989, 1990, 2008) and by ecofeminist philosophers like Val Plumwood (1990, 1993), with whom Debbie sustained a vigorous dialogue. That challenge was later developed by male anthropologists like De Castro (1992), Descola (1994) and Tim Ingold (1994) and, in the history of science, by Bruno Latour (e.g. 1993, 2013). In her most recent work on the climate crisis Haraway resolutely speaks of natureculture (2016).

But Zoe Todd, Indigenous feminist scholar from Edmonton in Canada, asks whether this ‘ontological turn’ is just another word for colonialism. She laments how celebrated white scholars like Bruno Latour and Viveiros de Castro do not fully acknowledge their debts to Indigenous thinkers and writers, rarely citing the publications of a long list of North American Indigenous scholars she quotes. She argues:

When we cite European thinkers who discuss the ‘more-than-human’ but do not discuss their Indigenous contemporaries who are writing on the exact same topics, we perpetuate the white supremacy of the academy. (Todd 2016, 18)

Moreover, she suggests this is more than just academic colonialism, but entails cherry-picking Indigenous thought without acknowledging the broader political and legal situation and the relationality of Indigenous people and scholars.

In contrast with such academic colonialism, Debbie constantly juxtaposes the ontological frictions between Indigenous and western views, an approach she dubbed ‘firestick wisdom’ (Rose 2011, 13–16), ‘rubbing them together to see what sparks might be produced’ (Van Dooren and Chrulew 2022, 3).⁷ Debbie’s work constantly names and acknowledges her Indigenous teachers from the Yarralin mob. And, as Linda Payi Ford observes in her Prelude,

⁷ Anna Tsing offers a rather different metaphor for this shared dialogical approach: a ‘call-and-response as it refuses to stop at the lip of ontological ravines’ (Tsing 2022, 16).

the book *Country of the Heart* (2002) recognised Linda, her mother, her sister and April Bright as co-authors. Debbie enthusiastically promoted Indigenous Australian scholars like Linda Payi Ford and historians Humbert Tommy Nyuwinkarri and Hobbles Danaiyarri. Moreover, she was acutely aware of the political and legal situation of her work, engaging in advocacy in arduous land claim work in 20 cases, not just in the Northern Territory as Linda describes in her Prelude, but also on the Yorta Yorta claim in Victoria and New South Wales.⁸

Dreaming Ecology needs to be situated not just in the field of anthropology but in the broader terrain of environmental humanities—a field which Debbie helped to create and sustain not just through her own writing but through the establishment first of a section in the *Australian Humanities Review* and the co-founding of the international journal, *Environmental Humanities*. This book juxtaposes Indigenous knowledge and practice with the insights of western environmental sciences, in the classification of plants and animals for instance, and celebrates the holistic approach in the ecology of the time. Since the period of her research and writing a rich corpus of transdisciplinary scholarship has emerged, often involving challenging collaborations between environmental scientists, social scientists and humanities scholars: animal and multispecies studies; philosophies of ethics and justice embracing the more-than-human and extinction studies; and importantly poetry. Debbie's writing, so sensitively attuned to language, deep storytelling and aesthetics inspired several Australian poets including Martin Harrison, Peter Minter and her later partner Peter Boyle.⁹ Such transdisciplinary writing has intensified as the scale of the climate crisis has become more urgent and more acute.

8 This is how she expressed it:

I have worked on more than twenty land claims, native title cases, and Aboriginal land disputes, in some cases working with the claimants and in other cases working for the Aboriginal Land Commissioner. I have carried out sacred sites surveys throughout the Victoria River District. In the course of this work I have become an experienced bush woman: I have travelled by truck, foot, boat, and helicopter, have driven cross-country through sand and mud, across boulders and through the long grass, and have slept out in a wide variety of places and conditions. (Rose n.d.)

9 Martin Harrison and Debbie engaged in a dialogue where she wrestles with the relation between text and ecology (2013). Peter Boyle dedicated his book-length poem (2019) to Debbie. This was written during her terminal illness and explored shades of dark and light, grief and joy, death and life. It won the Kenneth Slessor Prize in 2020. Thanks to Richard Davis for these important observations about Debbie's broader influence.

Thom Van Dooren and Matthew Chrulew (2022) observe in their fine edited volume *Kin: Thinking with Deborah Bird Rose* that Debbie's concerns were not just scholarly. Both her life and work were

grounded in and animated by a world of kin. This is a world of interwoven, intergenerational, more than human connectivity that both sustains and obligates, calling out for care and responsibility ... the question that she returned to relentlessly—is how we are to keep faith with such a world in the midst of the ongoing processes of colonization and extinctions, of ecocide and genocide. (Van Dooren and Chrulew 2022, 2)

This expanded sense of kinship is, as they observe, thoroughly grounded in the insights of her adopted family, her friends and teachers in Yarralin and Lingara, over several decades. She worked with the Yarralin mob as with many other Indigenous people across Australia to reclaim part of the lands stolen from them. In 2016 the Traditional Owners of the Yarralin area finally gained Aboriginal freehold titles to their lands.

As I write, the lands around Victoria River are flooded in what has again been described as 'unprecedented' and hundreds of people have been evacuated to temporary shelter in Katherine and Darwin. The increased severity and frequency of natural disasters—bushfires and droughts, floods and cyclones, storm surges and sea level rise—has long been predicted by environmental scientists as the result of global heating due to the accumulation of greenhouse gases in our shared atmosphere. The ecological devastation which Debbie and Darrell witnessed and recorded from the 1980s as the consequence of dispossession by white settlers and pastoralism has been compounded by the global effects of a climate crisis emergent from a colonising capitalism and an extractive relation to Earth, ocean and atmosphere (see Ghosh 2021)—the antithesis of the Indigenous relation predicated on care and the mutual connectivity of all life.

Australia is at this moment on the cusp of a major referendum which later in 2023 will decide whether a Voice to Parliament for Indigenous Australians, as envisaged by the Uluru Statement from the Heart (2017), will be enshrined in our constitution.¹⁰ Indigenous Australians clearly do not share the wealth or wellbeing of non-Indigenous Australians across a vast array of indicators—life expectancy, health, education, employment, housing—and experience far higher rates of domestic violence, child removal and

¹⁰ Alas this referendum was lost to a loud 'No' campaign saturated with disinformation.

incarceration (including children and youth). So far efforts to ‘close the gap’ have largely failed and more punitive methods like the Intervention from 2007 to 2012 have had dire consequences (Altman and Hinkson 2010). It is crucial that Indigenous people are given greater powers of self-determination and control, through embedding new mechanisms like the Voice, treaties and truth-telling. In this process, the voices of those living in remote regions like the Victoria River District need to be heard and listened to. Such voices resonate eloquently and loudly throughout *Dreaming Ecology*. We hope this book will contribute to a broader conversation in Australia as well as mark a return to the Yarralin mob—a giving back from Debbie to her teachers and also a return across generations.

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