

Deborah Bird Rose (1946–2018): A personal reflection

Deborah Bird Rose, born in the USA but professionally active mainly in Australia, was a distinguished anthropologist and consultant on many Aboriginal land claims. Her book, *Dingo Makes Us Human* (1992), became a classic of Aboriginal Australian ethnography. During the later stages of her career, when she was a Senior Fellow at various research centres within the Australian National University (1994–2008) and Professor of Social Inclusion at Macquarie University, Sydney (2008–18), her research focus shifted to multispecies ethnography, though this work always remained in conversation with Aboriginal perspectives. Her initiatives in Multispecies Studies – involving the publication of many books and innumerable papers, the organization of groundbreaking workshops and seminars, and the supervision and mentoring of an illustrious band of younger scholars – helped to lay the foundations for the environmental humanities as a new and important environmental discourse.

Since further information about Deborah's academic achievements is available elsewhere, however, I would prefer here to offer a brief personal reflection, a reflection specifically on a certain quality that seemed to illuminate Deb's life and lend it an extraordinary coherence and aura. I am not sure exactly how to describe this quality, but I think it was to do with a radical openness to the world, which was not the mere observational curiosity of the scientist but a reaching-out, an inexhaustible desire to connect and respond. Perhaps this was simply life force. Or perhaps the yen to reach out – the great 'yes' to life, as Deb liked to put it – was itself what generated such force. But at any rate, that desire to connect and respond knew no

boundaries, observed no categories: though her work as a writer, scholar and researcher took her out to exotic locations and launched her on exciting adventures, there was at the same time nothing too mundane or small not to become material for her writing. I remember, for example, when, on a road trip she and I once took down through Central Australia, we called in at Uluru: while I grumpily waited outside the Tourist Hub – the Anangu Cultural Centre – determined to have a first-hand experience of the Rock rather than joining the tourist throng, Deb, who had of course had years of unparalleled first-hand experience of Aboriginal Australia, avidly combed the story boards and displays inside, and came out with reams of notes on all the information and Dreaming stories she had found in there. Later, when we were on the road again, she dazzled me with her own, freshly minted interpretations of those stories – never mind that the information had been intended for tourists.

Life and work merged in many other ways too for Deb. While she threw herself into academia, not shrinking from its institutionalism and the impersonality of its rankings and impact factors and such like, she at the same time gathered intimate circles of colleagues around her, creating little tribes or *sanghas* right there in the jaws of the bureaucracy. I am thinking of groups such as the early Ecological Humanities Working Group (2001), Kangaloon (2009), which was a fellowship for creative ecologies, and the later Extinction Studies Working Group (2012). And though Deb more than satisfied all the patriarchal requirements of the academy, with its hierarchies, competitiveness and rule of productivity, her thinking and writing invariably gave expression to her own

Freya Mathews

About the author

Freya is an environmental philosopher who lives in Australia.

Citation

Mathews F (2019) Deborah Bird Rose (1946–2018): A personal reflection. *The Ecological Citizen* 3: 93–4.

Keywords

Environmental humanities

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unapologetic femininity and feminist consciousness. It sought insight not through detachment and value neutrality but through the eye of love and it expressed itself always with beauty and grace. I think it was for this reason that at the end of her talks one usually found her surrounded by eager young women inspired by her example.

And while Deb held high office with all due dignity, she allowed herself a degree of playfulness, again undercutting the self-importance of the institution: I remember her delivering an entire talk while wearing a pair of little furry ears, and, on another occasion, opening a workshop on feral animals wearing her grandmother’s fox fur stole, complete with fox head dangling over her shoulder.

I am tempted to suggest that what Deb managed to do was to turn the secular dross of academia into a positively *spiritual* path. But that is not quite right either. Spirituality was itself one of the strands with which Deb loved to weave rather than the definitive end result she seemed to be aiming to achieve. She adored creating rituals and ceremonies

of all sorts but I don’t think spirituality *per se* could be seen as the arc of her life. The path that she was weaving out of all the various threads life offers – the personal, familial, professional, intellectual, spiritual, aesthetic, poetic – was perhaps simply a *path of Debbie-ness*. And this was a new and unique thing under the sky, which she forged not by making herself a stand-out exception but by synergizing creatively – in true ecological style – with a myriad of others.

And maybe this – making of oneself a path – is really an ultimate good in life, a good that cannot be captured by predetermined guidelines because it is unique to the individual who achieves it. It is a good because it exceeds categories, where every kind of evil and mediocrity is totally bound and determined, even if reactively, by tired old categories.

So this little reflection seems to have turned into more a philosophy of Debbie-ness – a meditation on the Dao of Debbie-ness! – than an ‘in memoriam’, but perhaps that is not a bad way to remember one who was such a true philosopher. ■

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