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[Issue II](#)
[Issue III](#)
[Issue IV](#)

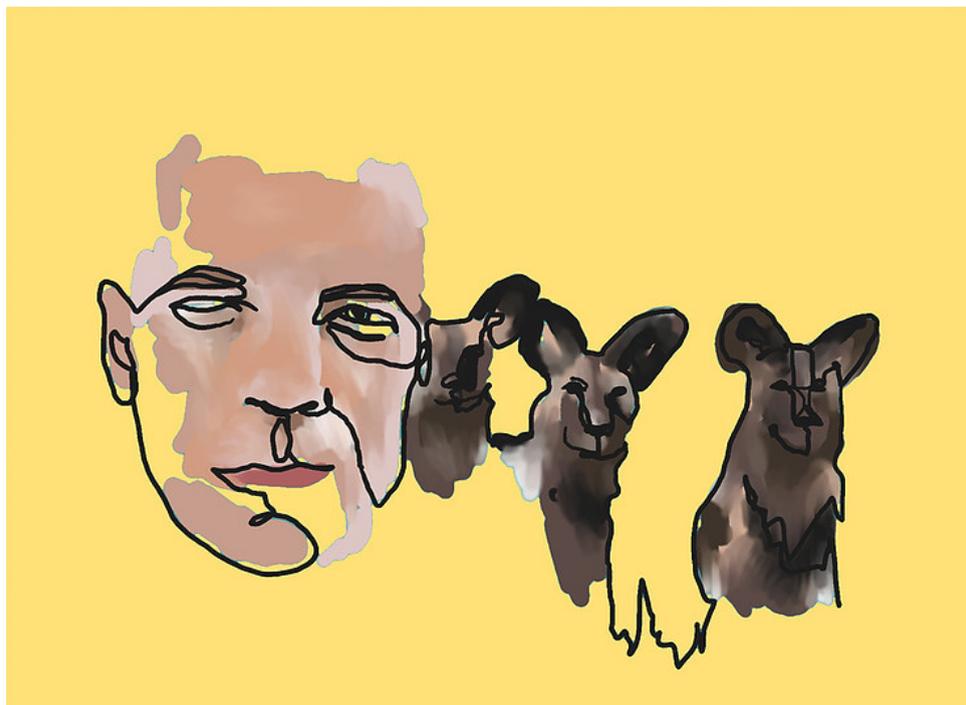
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Reading Dingo Stories

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A Short Review of Deborah Bird Rose's Wild Dog Dreaming – Love and Extinction (2011)

By Harshavardhan Bhat

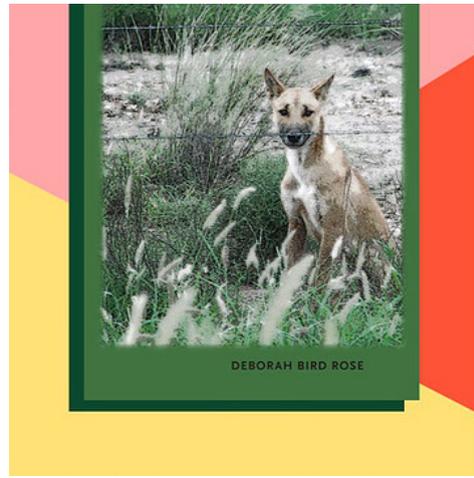


As a researcher reading on the ways of the emergent monsoon, I am often struck by the ways the monsoon takes life, just as it gives life. The monsoon intermediates our concepts of life and death to an experience that is far more complex – where the matters of the air and the living intertwine in the production of dreams – where life and death entangle, as an offering of the air. At the same time, stories of drought, extreme variability and the deep modification of monsoonal ecosystems inform me of the anthropogenic and anthropocentric violence seeking a certain kind of disturbance. To seek disturbance is to seek a methodology of violence when perhaps none is needed. Coloniality seeks disruption as a methodology of extraction and harm centric transformation, which conditions a certain kind of irreversibility – that is inculcated by the analytic and is not contained by boundaries.

Extinction is a similar crisis; its irreversibility and an inability to repair and heal haunts an ethics of responsibility and the very ability to respond, if at all. In *Wild Dog Dreaming* (2011), Deborah Bird Rose thinks with her Aboriginal teachers and informants



in figuring similar themes. If settler humans view dingoes as trophies, to be skinned and displayed in public – performing killing as a celebratory and necessary act – how does this understanding confront a world where the dingo co-produces the law? She like many, is deeply confronted by the violence unleashed on the dingo by white settler colonial folk in Australia. As her teacher, Old Tim asks of her to write in a letter: “Tell the white man, ‘don't touch any Aboriginal land... Aboriginal people got to stay on their own land: their own law’” (p. 86). Coloniality, however, refuses to stay out. There is a silence, she argues, in the moment before the “death guns” (p. 71) get the dingo. The event she opens the book with stays heavily with me, recurring again and again in the reading – of images of dead dingoes suspended from a tree, right outside Canberra, over barbed wire as a jarring display. In reference to the letter by Old Tim of Yarralin protesting the air droppings of 1080, a toxic poison to bait dingoes, Rose writes of how chains of killing and/or extinction don't end with the subject but foster a certain kind of death that extend connections and reach far beyond. 1080 poisons life. Devastation here is an active practice of settler colonial analytics that does not acknowledge the dingo as kin or peer or more-than-human.



"Devastation here is an active practice of settler colonial analytics that does not acknowledge the dingo as kin or peer or more-than-human."



The act of dreaming in the face of devastation is not perhaps a measure of normative hope here. Bird Rose, informed by Old Tim, draws it out as a world of tracks of creator beings – forms of multispecies kinships and their ancestors. The book takes the reader through a particular current of difference, where she attempts to negotiate an understanding between certain Western philosophies and Aboriginal being. Like the word ‘country’, which is used extensively in the book, they mean different things to different people. Beyond it being a spatial jurisdictional unit or a European reference to the countryside, ‘country’ in this form of dreaming informs us

of a certain kind of multispecies circulation. She cajoles a Western tradition to open up to the reality that more-than-human beings are also subjects to their violence. More-than-human beings write life. There is a need to refuse nature-culture dualisms, in a multispecies world of interconnections, she argues. One comprehends or dreams of comprehension not by exclusion but by an openness to interconnection. In this world of flux, the earth is on the move. Just as the earth nurtures processes between death and life, kinships, she tells us, are of the flesh and blood of the earth. In monsoonal matters, one learns that there are often several earths, so to speak – several grounds, different airs that hold relations within contexts. As part of her earths, co-existing with and taught by others in those contexts, Bird Rose writes “Where Dreaming Dingoes travelled, those tracks and sites are in the country of particular people; these people are the Lawmen and Lawwomen. They uphold Dingo life and law” (p. 99).

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Bird Rose in this book conceptually works through what she calls 'death work' in figuring ways of describing the work of killing and some of its consequences. Akin to extinction, death is complicated. Settler coloniality unleashes in these stories a certain kind of extinction by not recognising the brilliance and interconnectedness that grounds even their own lives. In wanting to be embodied, Bird Rose suggests that life seeks to find a way – across death and air. In referring to Old Tim and his dingo stories, we learn via Bird Rose that dingoes shape shift except in front of the human. For the humans of the dingo, a form of human unexceptionalism meshes with the ways of the living contrary to human exceptionalism in western tradition. Death entangles with the complexity of the living where even the dingo recognizes that it is coming. "Perhaps voices from the death space will speak to us," writes Bird Rose in seeking an ethics that emerges out of a meeting between life and death. Offering us the concept of ecological existentialism, Deborah Bird Rose in this book ties trouble to the ethical nature of these times of acceleration and toxicity – its inextricable state in the deepening of violence learnt and reproduced as part of human exceptionalism. In thinking with these stories and the rate of extinction today, one senses in her writing a scream, a plea at complete uncertainty – held together by a certain kind of love.

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