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To cite this article: Eben Kirksey (2021): Obituary: Deborah Bird Rose (1946–2018), The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology, DOI: [10.1080/14442213.2020.1867956](https://doi.org/10.1080/14442213.2020.1867956)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14442213.2020.1867956>



Published online: 18 Jan 2021.



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# Obituary: Deborah Bird Rose (1946–2018)

Eben Kirksey\*

Deborah (Debbie) Bird Rose taught that life usually offers an intergenerational gift with death. Ecological communities—associations of predators and prey, omnivorous scavengers, parasites and hosts—depend on ongoing intergenerational cycles of life and death. The food web is premised on reciprocity among species. Debbie used stories to show how humans are involved in these reciprocal relations. She pioneered approaches to environmental humanities and multispecies studies with her interdisciplinary research, while situating important stories with clear-eyed analysis of colonialism and genocide.

From September 1980 to July 1982, Debbie conducted twenty-two months of ethnographic research among the Aboriginal communities of Yarralin and Lingarra in Australia's Northern Territory. With her first major book, *Dingo Makes us Human*, she described a 'Dreaming ecology' that is 'embedded in a system that has no centre' (1992, 220). In dialogue with her Yarralin teachers—especially Hobbles Danayarri—as well as thinkers like James Lovelock and Gregory Bateson, she described ecological systems composed of conscious beings who communicate, act and react, and 'adhere as a matter of self-interest and free will to the same set of understandings' (1992, 220).

Debbie understood the idea of 'wildness' as a product of capitalism and colonialism. Captain Cook, as Hobbles liked to say, was the real wild one who 'failed to recognise Law, destroyed people and country, lived by damage, and promoted cruelty' (Rose 2004, 4; see also Rose 1984). Another one of Debbie's teachers, Daly Pulkara, showed her the difference between wild places and 'quiet country' where the 'care of generations of people is evident to those who know how to see it'. In *Reports from a Wild Country* she argues that colonisation and wildness produce the violence as settler societies encroach on Indigenous lands. 'We cannot avoid the knowledge that conquest requires death and dispossession' (2004, 4).

A new kind of death emerged in twentieth century Australia as modern chemistry intensified the violence of settler ranching practices. Debbie introduced the idea of 'double death' to describe processes that uncouple life and death—diminishing death's capacity to turn dying back toward the living. Farmers and conservationists

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trying to kill ‘invasive species’ in Australia often use 1080 poison, the common name for sodium fluoroacetate (FCH<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>2</sub>Na). Debbie began studying 1080 because a primary target of these poisoning campaigns has been the dingo—an animal that has long figured into her work. In *Wild Dog Dreaming* she describes how dingoes experience a painful death from 1080 poisoning, and also continue to kill others in the afterlife. The process of double death occurs as living creatures feed on poisoned dingo carrion for sustenance and are killed as the poison moves through generations and across species lines (Rose 2011). These insights have broad importance. 1080 poison is just one substance among many others that is producing double death on a planetary scale.

In her final years among us, Debbie turned her attention towards the entangled lives of humans, plants and flying foxes. Debbie’s final book on this subject, *Shimmer*, will be published posthumously by Edinburgh University Press. Before passing away she offered a taste of the exuberance that is to come with shimmer. Flowering plants ‘invite, or lure, others through their dazzling brilliance of colour, scent, and shape ... in their desire to attract others whom they need for pollination, they have brought forth a worldwide multispecies potlach’. ‘Shimmer is an Aboriginal aesthetic that helps call us into these multispecies worlds’. An experience of this brilliance brings us into ‘a vibrant and vibrating world’ (Rose 2017).

Debbie reports that she learned about shimmer, or *bir’yun*, through dancing all night. Her mentors taught her the importance of performance—of knowing other bodies and the earth through dance and song.

In remembering Debbie, this image of a shimmering dancer stands out. She leaves a legacy of knowledge that came from being in the world, and from her work as an expert allied with social justice struggles. In her *curriculum vitae* she wrote:

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 site 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.

As coming generations of scholars continue allied struggles for multispecies justice, we can remember the life of Debbie Bird Rose as a gift with the potential to engender future possibilities of flourishing.

## Funding

This work was supported by Australian Research Council [grant number DP200102763].

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