

## **Book Review:**

### ***Wild Dog Dreaming: Love and Extinction***

**By Deborah Bird Rose**

**University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville & London, 2011.**

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In the same week that Melbourne joined the global Occupation movements started by Occupy Wall Street, about thirty people, almost all younger generation researchers, postgraduate students and academics, gathered into a large circle for a university Master Class by Deborah Bird Rose. We introduced ourselves from a diverse range of fields (including theology, ecology, literary and cultural studies, Indigenous studies, philosophy, mathematics, photography and people who passionately loved their dogs). Commonalities emerged: a deep care for this world and for Earth others; a commitment to serious thinking about how to heal our relationships with these companions, many of whom have disappeared in this time of massive extinctions; and a concern over how to do this from within epistemological systems that are not of our choosing.

Our conversation considered what it means to live in Australia today, and how we might be most alive by living in connectivity with Country. Trying to do this in the Western contemporary world can be limited and depressing. On this day it was a simple practical reflection from Deborah that seemed to clarify and strengthen the value of small individual decisions and actions. She spoke about everyday reciprocity and trying to give something back to the living reality of the material world that calls us to respond ethically, and the morality of individual thoughtfulness about making real and ordinary decisions on a daily basis. And we wondered whether maybe, sometimes, just turning away from the problematic of a nature-culture binary might work better than giving it too much attention. Our discussion had connections to the philosophical ecology found in Deborah's most recent book, which seems to me to be an important book for our times, perhaps highlighted by the strong engagement young people, like the group at the Master Class, have with Deborah's work.

*Wild Dog Dreaming* explores what it means to live as "we are entering an era of loss of life unprecedented in human history," in a time when death is both the loss of the living and the death of the multiplicity of forms of life. Some central questions arise: Who are we and how do we fit in? How might we find our way? How might we be most alive as part of Country that is flourishing?

Deborah's learning from her Aboriginal teachers is integral to her work (Old Tim Yilngayarri is a significant influence and presence throughout). Aboriginal Law is given a privileged role because Country, and a love for Country, is the basis for Aboriginal culture. It has it right when it comes to leading a life that is beneficial to the world

around you. Stories from Deborah's Aboriginal teachers and from her experiences living with the Aboriginal people of the Northern Australian communities of Yarralin and Lingarra are one strand of the book's fabric of many stories in dialogue. Deborah brings together stories and ideas with which she has engaged, from philosophers and scholars such as Lev Shestov (loving the uncertainty and transience of life), Michael Soulé (people save what they love), Emil Fackenheim, Erazim Kohak and Walter Benjamin, from theologians such as Martin Buber and biblical texts (the *Book of Job*, Solomon's *Song of Songs*), from Aboriginal Dreaming stories and from poetry by Stephen Edgar, Peter Boyle and MTC Cronin, to name a few. Deborah develops a strong critique of Emmanuel Levinas: "He is a special guest in the conversation around the fire because we all want to know how his philosophy may be challenged, and whether it will survive, when the call of the other is a bark or howl, and the face of the other is an animal."

Through situating these thinkers in ecological dialogue, new ideas are generated around big topics such as co-evolving life, death, love and knowledge. I was not familiar with all of the thinkers drawn into the book's conversation (although I will follow up on some) but that did not seem to matter too much: my lack of knowledge did not stop me from grasping the complexity of the ethics presented.

A key perspective on humanity is Deborah's "ecological existentialism", a loneliness arising from being an Earth creature who has evolved as an Earth participant amongst other Earth creatures, and whose future is becoming one of isolation as connections with other creatures diminish, their deaths largely our own doing. And then who will we be, or will we be at all? Deborah puts it this way: "You may not be interested in extinction ... but extinction is interested in you." The book invites us to face the reality of the current rate of extinctions, of emptiness, from where perhaps voices from the death space *will speak* to us. There we might encounter a narrative emerging from extinctions, a level of blood that connects us rather than driving us apart. Such a narrative would enjoin us to rethink everything we thought we knew about who we are and how to live within the imperiled family of life on Earth.

The power of dialogue and cross-species kinship, of lives lived in relationship with others, is at the heart of this book: "Narrative encounters aim for truth; and truth, in my context of writing, is the spark that illuminates the ethical proximity of others – all others, all living beings." Can we come back from a death space that is not death as a part of life, but is an unmaking and an end? *Wild Dog Dreaming* is a response to this question that impels us to strive for a life more promising.

## Notes

1. Rebecca Lucas holds a PhD in environmental philosophy and literary theory from the Centre for Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies, Monash University. She is currently teaching Literature in the Foundation Studies program at Trinity College, as well as lecturing in Australian Environmental Philosophy in the Australian Indigenous Studies program at the University of Melbourne.