**Book Review**


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The essays in this volume reflect the concerns of Deborah Bird Rose. We are invited to think along with her. She spent many years of listening to people who told stories and revealed to her their view of the Land. Her main work *Dingo Makes Us Human* (1992) grew out of her doctoral research in the 1980s. Rose died in 2018.

In this collection there are contributions from twelve authors which explore Rose’s legacy. I was provoked and challenged by the diversity of this collection while reflecting upon the veracity of some of the novel claims which the authors make. My reflections are based upon the essays in the volume and also Rose’s works which have inspired the essays.

The need for de-colonizing the globe seems timely with the discussions about the Indigenous Voice to Parliament in Australia and human-induced Climate Change which envisages a return to Indigenous land management practices on the Australian continent. The Voice means listening to Aboriginal voices and taking them seriously. Rose spent her career listening intently to Aboriginal people at Yarralin in the remote Victoria River District of the Northern Territory of Australia.

In a review of *Dingo*, Tonkinson (1994: 190) noted the unorthodoxy of Rose’s ‘atypical monograph’. Similarly, this collection is less about humans as Rose’s concerns went beyond the human. Despite its title, *Kin* is not an anthropological work. It is not about the kinships systems which have been the main preoccupation, and one might say, the almost exclusive concern of Australian social anthropologists. Only Tsing, one of the authors, claims to be anthropologist. In a turn to ‘environmental humanities’ the authors argue against human exceptionalism which tends to diminish humans as subjects.
Rose opened new windows into the eco-humanities, a hitherto under-explored terrain now made urgent by the need to fight climate change. The essays about Scotch broom and Buffalo show that even weeds and ferals can have a place in the future. But efforts to restore a pristine nature without Indigenous involvement will not be authentic. This is refreshing. The spectre of the extinction of species is alarming and gut-wrenching.

It is a fresh and critical approach to Western science which has often descended into arid scientism, and self-serving arrogance leading to the subjugation of Nature and Indigenous peoples. Isabel Stengers explores *Dingo* in ‘Awakening to the Call of Others’. She appears to argue against autonomous science, the notion of ‘reality as it is’, (58) a kind of reductionist positivism with humans at its centre.

I find myself in agreement with Rose’s idea that reason can’t account for all natural phenomena and the complex relationships which exist between them. There must therefore be humility. Humble attitudes to Nature are closer to the values of Indigenous societies which foster partnerships and collaborations with non-human species.

The human-nature distinction is predicated upon nature-culture division according to Stephen Muecke in ‘After Nature: Totemism Revisited’. In her essay on Val Plumwood, Rose insisted that in Indigenous societies there is no nature-culture divide. Anthropology itself was founded on a naturalist ontology based on the separation of nature and culture, and to this day many of its practitioners can’t think without it. This led to the dominance of naturalism.

None of the essay writers have concerned themselves with language matters and have never therefore grappled with that aspect of the truly human. Rose proposed that we listen actively. But in a review of *Dingo*, Tonkinson (1994: 191) indicated that she struggles to find an authentic voice, lacks interlinear texts, and renders Yarralin voices in Kriol without translation which in his view lack fluency and ‘will be experienced by most readers as ‘fractured and confusing’. Her claim that members of the Gregory expedition to the Victoria River of 1855–56 could have effectively communicated with Aboriginal people seems to me to be naïve. Without a knowledge of their languages, communication would have been almost impossible.

Muecke (140) makes a brief foray into language in the section ‘Being, Becoming, Belonging’ but his claim for the ‘common absence of the verb “to be”’ is not convincing. It is not true for Pitjantjatjara, a language to which he refers. Nor does the presence or absence of such a word demonstrate his point about the unimportance of ‘existence’ among Aboriginal concepts. The dichotomy of ‘being’ against ‘becoming’ must be rejected in his theory of ‘becomings’ because ‘to be or not to be’ never
was a question. Rose stands in a tradition of non-linguistic social anthropology. Her heroes, such as Stanner, had a limited grasp of Aboriginal languages as he was primarily concerned with social systems. That said, Bird’s explication of some terms in Aboriginal languages goes beyond the dictionary definitions of words, such as ngurlu, (Rose 1992: 82) found in the Ngarinyman Dictionary (2019) with the briefest of definitions. This explication provides helpful understandings. Regrettably, not more exploration of meaning encoded in Aboriginal languages appears in her work, nor glossaries of words used by Aboriginal language speakers. There is a desperate need for intercultural understanding.

The authors fit within an orthodox Western tradition of catastrophism reminiscent of the dire prophecies of the Club of Rome in the 1970s. It could be a counsel of despair. There appears to be little acknowledgement of efforts made to prevent extinctions and reverse climate change by changing land management practices. Rose’s colleague Darrel Lewis seems more even-handed in his treatment of Victoria River history.

A quest for a new non-western spirituality is emerging. The attempt to dethrone God by early anthropologists has now come full circle and we now see the dethronement of a humanity which itself became invested with divine authority. Rose was spared a view of pre-invasion Aboriginal life because she worked with people who were absorbed into a settler pastoral regime which suppressed their former lives and cast them as victims. There are few published accounts of that prehistory for the Victoria River. The essay writers have limited experience of those societies. From their distant western standpoints, they seek to return to a time in which they have never lived. They fail to recognize fear, violence, and inter-tribal warfare as the legacies of animist societies and which have been explored by Peter Sutton in The Politics of Suffering (2011). Rose appears to call for a return to animism. Could that move have serious consequences for social justice in human communities?

References