
THINKING WITH
DEBORAH BIRD ROSE
THOM VAN DOOREN &
MATTHEW CHRULEW,
EDITORS
KIN

THE STORY OF
MISTLETOE
MUTUALISMS
IS ALL ABOUT
ENTANGLEMENTS OF
INTERDEPENDENCIES,
NUTRIENT CYCLES,
AND SEDUCTIONS.
IT TELLS OF AN ETHOS
OF GIVING THAT
GOES AROUND,
AND COMES BACK,
PRODUCING
ENTANGLEMENTS
THAT ARE VERITABLE
ORGIES OF
SEDUCTIVE GIFTS.

—DEBORAH BIRD ROSE

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FOR DEBORAH BIRD ROSE

CONTENTS

WORLDS OF KIN

An Introduction

THOM VAN DOOREN AND MATTHEW CHRULEW

This entangled quality of life on Earth depends on and supports connectivity. There are numerous ways into thinking about these matters. I offer one way: the kinship mode. It situates us here on Earth, and asserts that we are not alone in time or place: we are at home where our kind of life (Earth life) came into being, and we are members of entangled generations of Earth life, generations that succeed each other in time and place. . . . Ethical questions within the world of connectivity start with how to appreciate the differences between humankind and others, while at the same time also understanding that we are all interdependent. How to engage in world making across species? How to work toward world making that enhances the lives of others? And how to do all this in the time of extinctions, knowing, as we must, that we are living amidst the ruination of others?

—DEBORAH BIRD ROSE, *Wild Dog Dreaming* (2011)

THE LIFE AND WORK OF Deborah Bird Rose were grounded in and animated by a world of kin. This is a world of interwoven, intergenerational, more-than-human connectivity that both sustains and obligates, calling out for care and responsibility. Kinship is reciprocal, situated, tying human beings to other kinds of animals and plants, vulnerable and creative bodies all, and to the wider seasons and patterns of Earth and the cosmos. While such an understanding always carries great significance, the particular challenge of Debbie's work—the question that she returned to relentlessly—is how we are to keep faith with such a world in the midst of ongoing processes of colonization and extinction, of ecocide and genocide.

This book takes this expansive and generative notion of kin as its title and its watchword. Importantly, this is a mode of thinking and living that is thoroughly rooted in the insights of Debbie's Indigenous friends and teachers, especially those of the Aboriginal communities of Yarralin and Lingara in northern Australia. As Debbie put it in the monograph that grew out of her doctoral research in the 1980s, *Dingo Makes Us Human*, "Yarralin people tell us that the earth is alive and constantly giving life, the mother of us all. The fact of one mother makes us all kin of a sort" (Rose 1992, 220). Over the decades that followed, this fundamental notion of a more-than-human kinship took on an increasingly central role in Debbie's thinking, drawing the insights of her Aboriginal teachers into dialogue with both relational Western philosophies and the emerging ecological sciences. In this way, she sought to articulate and advocate for a world of kin, grounded in a profound sense of the connectivities and relationships that hold us together, vulnerable and responsible to one another.

Inspired by and in conversation with the remarkable body of research and writing that Debbie produced during her life, this collection seeks to make a distinctive contribution to the environmental humanities. It features contributions on decolonial and multispecies cosmopolitics, more-than-human sociality, speculative fabulation, ecological totemism, Anthropocene extinctions, and a range of other topics. Engaging with the central concepts of Debbie's work—from Year Zero and ethical time to ecological existentialism and world-crazy love, from double death and wild country to responsive attentiveness and generative care—the contributors to this volume work to face up to the social and ecological inheritances of settler colonialism and industrial modernity, searching for effective and ethical modes of address, storytelling, and practice in the wake of dispossession and destruction.

Deborah Bird Rose (1946–2018) was one of the founding and most original thinkers in the emergence of the environmental humanities, both in Australia and internationally. Over the course of a career spanning almost forty years, she published many widely read, cited, and often-reprinted books: *Hidden Histories*, *Dingo Makes Us Human*, *Nourishing Terrains*, *Country of the Heart*, *Reports from a Wild Country*, *Wild Dog Dreaming*, and, finally, *Shimmer* (Rose 1991, 1992, 1996; Rose et al. 2002; Rose 2004, 2011, 2021); edited numerous volumes, such as *Aboriginal Australians and Christian Missions*, *Manifesto for Living in the Anthropocene*, and *Extinction Studies* (Swain and Rose 1988; Gibson, Rose, and Fincher 2015; Rose, van Dooren, and Chrulew 2017); and cofounded the journal section Ecological Humanities in the *Australian Humanities Review* and the international journal *Environmental Humanities*. Through this work Debbie made major contributions in a range of fields: from the environmental humanities and the anthropology of Indigenous Australia, to extinction studies, animal and multispecies studies, and philosophies of ethics, justice, religion, environment, temporality, and place. At the same time, Debbie also inspired the development of new modes of scholarship. Hers was a scholarly practice of paying close attention, of drawing together disparate voices from within and far beyond the academy, a practice grounded in a skilled refinement of the crafts of writing and storytelling, and a deep commitment to and creative intervention toward better possibilities for life and death.

Debbie was initially trained as an anthropologist, and her writing and thinking were characterized by a profoundly dialogical approach. Her great art and skill was to bring diverse stories, ideas, and concepts into generative conversation, not to create harmony or synergy but rather to stretch them beyond their comfort zones, rubbing them together to see what sparks might be produced—an approach that she named "firestick wisdom" (Rose 2011, 13–16). In this way, she drew on Indigenous knowledges, philosophy, literature, theology, ecology, and the broader natural sciences. But all of her work retained a strong grounding in the ethnographic methods of her anthropological training.

Born and raised in the United States, Debbie came to Australia in 1980 to carry out PhD research.[1] She began her academic career living and learning with Aboriginal communities of the Victoria River District in northern Australia. This was to be a lifelong relationship. Over the next forty years, she continued to visit these communities and work and think with them. In addition to them being her friends and adopted family, Debbie worked with

the community—as she did with numerous others around the country—on their claims to have the lands stolen through colonization returned to them (see Ford, this volume). In 2016, just a couple of years before her death, these Traditional Owners of the Yarralin area were finally awarded an Aboriginal Freehold title on their lands.

Again and again throughout her life, Debbie returned in her writing to the stories and insights shared with her by her Aboriginal teachers, people like the clever man Old Tim Yilngayarri, Daly Pulkara, Hobbles Danaiyarri, and Jessie Wirrpa. In some cases, for example, in her first published article (Rose 1984) and in the collaborative, coauthored book *Country of the Heart* (Rose et al. 2002), she worked to create spaces for Indigenous people to tell their own stories, in their own words. In much of her writing, however, she took up the careful work of weaving these voices and stories into her own accounts, of thinking with their shared wisdom. While never a substitute for their testimony or for the powerful Indigenous scholarship now gaining place within and beyond the academy, for many decades she sought to make her writing a means by which otherwise-silenced voices could be heard. As these elders passed away, one by one, she continued their conversations, working to keep them moving in the world. As Debbie put it in an interview shortly before her death: "When I go back to my notebooks, or to stories that I've told in one context that I want to return to in another context, they just keep *unfolding*. It hasn't reached bottom; it never would reach bottom—there just isn't a bottom."[2]

These are stories that describe and perform a world of kin, of significant connectivities, reciprocities, and responsibilities. While Debbie had come to Australia with the same kinds of environmental sensibilities as many people of her generation, in Yarralin she learned to see a world in which the social and cultural did not stop at the edges of the human, in which "the environment" took on a whole different set of meanings. During her first few years in Australia, Debbie spent a great deal of time on Country with these communities. She also spent time with Aboriginal people and natural scientists working and learning together. She recounted her initial amazement as the same knowledgeable elders worked with botanists, geologists, hydrologists, and other specialized scientists, possessing a depth of knowledge across each of these domains and drawing connections between what Western disciplines separated.[3] This knowledge arose out of kinship relations, interactions of attention and care. It was at this point that she realized that to really understand this world, she needed to look beyond the conventional approaches of anthropology. As she put it, "If I'm going to understand the questions I want

answered I can't just stop at the edge of the cultural or the edge of the social, I have to keep going. . . . Especially in a kin-based society, where what's happening is in your Country, to and with your nonhuman kin, anthropology just isn't going to take you there. You really have to have a different suite of skills, of questions, and a different paradigm as to what counts as society."[4] Debbie began to take up these questions in a serious way in *Dingo Makes Us Human* (1992). This book is, in a sense, her most conventional ethnographic piece of writing—an effort to give an account of the way of life of the communities of Yarralin, for whom "kinship is all about the matrix of country, Dreamings, flesh, and people" (117). Her ethnography listens carefully to accounts of frontier violence and resistance as well as to stories of sustaining lifeways and of ongoing care for Country.

Debbie's account in this book did not neutrally reconstruct a foreign worldview or reduce Indigenous cosmologies and practices to curious artifacts but aimed instead to explore their cultural context, to articulate their status as situated knowledge, and to find ways to draw connections with comparable Western concepts and to elaborate their significance for contemporary problems.[5] To this end, for example, she drew tentative comparisons between Yarralin knowledge and cosmology and the emerging sciences of ecology and Earth systems theory, both of which challenge theological and metaphysical notions of human separation and control: "Lovelock notes that his understanding of Gaia as a living organism is not new. When Yarralin people speak of mother Earth they speak to a similar understanding. They are the inheritors of a theory and practice of participating in living systems. They understand these systems scientifically, through observations and hypotheses developed and tested through time. They also understand them metaphysically. Dreaming Law tells the story, often obliquely, frequently in bits that people have to put together for themselves. Dreaming and ecology intersect constantly, providing a rich understanding of universal and local life" (Rose 1992, 218). The depth and significance of these intercultural translations between systems of knowledge and practice in her work only grew as, at the turn of the millennium, interdisciplinary dialogues gained in sophistication alongside growing recognition of the urgency of ecological crisis and its irreducible social complexities.

Particularly from the late 1990s, Debbie's work took on a more explicitly philosophical and speculative approach and delved forthrightly—while equally carefully—into the task of building bridges between Indigenous and European concepts, understandings, and ethics. *Reports from a Wild Country* (2004) focused on histories and ongoing realities of colonization

in Australia, working to imagine possibilities for decolonization and genuine reconciliation. Comparing Western and Aboriginal understandings of time and land, life and death, she indicts the specious colonial narrative of progress enacted on the frontier at such devastating social and ecological cost, articulating against it the resilient and creative intergenerational work of Dreaming: "Memory, place, dead bodies and genealogies hold the stories that tell the histories that are not erased, and that refuse erasure. Painful as they are, they also constitute relationships of moral responsibility, binding people into the country and the generations of their lives" (57).

Reports was also one of the first books to bring Levinasian ethics into efforts to think about the challenges of life for contemporary Indigenous communities. As Debbie later reflected on the ethical challenges of her ethnographic work:

> It was talking to those dingo dreaming guys, [talking] with Old Tim, that I realized, he has been through slaughter and he's a survivor of genocide. He's a survivor in a really particular and peculiar way, and he is sitting here witnessing the war against dingoes. He is seeing another round of extinctions. He knows the white guys would just like to get rid of dingoes forever more, so he is seeing it happen now to his nonhuman kin. That, I think, was what drove me to the understanding that you can't sit and listen to this stuff in an innocent way, you can't be detached from it, you can't be overinvolved with it either (it's not your story); and so you have to listen in a really different, attentive way.[6]

To help think through these difficulties and obligations, Debbie turned to the work of scholars of genocide, especially of the Shoah. Emmanuel Levinas was foremost among them, but so, too, was the work of others such as James Hatley, Lev Shestov, Emil Fackenheim, and Edith Wyschogrod.

Wild Dog Dreaming (2011), the last book Debbie published before her death, continued in this vein. This is a disparate, mongrel collection of stories from some of Debbie's Aboriginal teachers, brought into conversation with biblical narratives and novels and poems from J. M. Coetzee, Peter Boyle, and others, alongside the insights of the natural sciences, from evolutionary theory and microbiology to ecology and biosemiotics, and the work of philosophers from Jacques Derrida to Val Plumwood. But, most of all, this is a book in which dogs guide the way. Among many other canine presences, we encounter Bobby, the dog that adopted Levinas and others during their internment in a Nazi prison camp; the fictitious Youngfella of Coetzee's novel *Disgrace*; the black dogs that guard King Solomon's tomb; and countless

1.1 Debbie with her two dogs, Kelly and Jay Jay, in 1998. PHOTO BY DARRELL LEWIS.

dingoes and wild dogs of outback Australia, variously cherished as kin and marked for extermination as vermin. In weaving together these diverse stories, this book is an invitation into a world of kin: a world of connectivities, of beauty and mystery that exceeds us in every way, and yet one that we find ourselves inescapably bound to, at stake in, and accountable for.

In the chapter titled "Job's Grief," Debbie tells the Aboriginal story of the dingo and the moon in dialogue with Job's biblical struggle with God. Each story helps us to see the other differently, to draw out possibilities for relationship and responsibility. In this case, the dialogue becomes a site for reimagining the conclusion to Job's story, a reimagining that inserts a canine presence: Blackie, a dog who befriends Job in his time of greatest need. "Being a dog, she would not be fussy about open sores and flaking skin, bad breath or loathsome odors. More than that, she would see him not as a sickly shell but as a full human" (Rose 2011, 78). In other chapters, a host of living and dead, philosophical and literary, canines guide the way. In each case they become vital figures for new ethical possibilities. More than simply embodying the good, they interrupt and reorient, transforming the status

quo through the provision of comfort, connection, recognition, guidance, and loyalty.

At the time of her death, Debbie had just completed work on a final book, *Shimmer* (2021), which explores the entangled lives and deaths of humans and flying foxes in Australia. Combining her research in multispecies studies, extinction studies, anthropology, and environmental philosophy, this book paints a vivid portrait of flying fox life and death in the Anthropocene that has important wider lessons for ecological and decolonial ontologies and ethics. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork both with Aboriginal Australians and with wildlife carers rescuing flying foxes from heat stress, tick paralysis, and managerial harassment, she bears witness to cruel practices and other anthropogenic and "natural" perils to coexistence. Building from sources such as Jesper Hoffmeyer's biosemiotics, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's philosophical anthropology, Levinas's post-Holocaust ethics, Shestov's existentialism and Isabelle Stengers's cosmopolitics, and the many insights of her Aboriginal friends and teachers, she articulates her own uniquely situated testament to the intergenerational gifts of ancestral power, ever more threatened, yet preciously shared and affirmed. As she put it:

> I was called to flying-foxes. My research questions led me into multispecies ethnographic work involving wildlife carers and academically trained scientists in eastern Australia. The people I met were at the front line in the work of holding flying-foxes back from the edge of extinction. I continued to visit the north, and I revisited my notebooks from several decades of research with Aboriginal people. The research was exhilarating, and then again at times deeply disheartening. I was to encounter more passion, intimacy, cruelty, horror, complexity, generosity and wild beauty than I could ever have imagined. Living with flying-foxes, I came to understand, takes us straight to the heart of every big question facing earth life in the 21st century. (Rose 2021, 2–3)

Flying foxes were one of Debbie's core passions. She was captivated by their silhouettes and gentle wingbeats across the sky at dusk, by their multifaceted social relationships and fidelity to one another and to particular places, by their ecological roles as pollinators and seed dispersers for increasingly fragmented forests: beings who dip their faces into blossoms in search of nectar and in so doing carry forest futures on their furry little bodies (228). *Shimmer* takes us into the fascinating lives and worlds of these remarkable creatures.

It does so, however, in a way that is equally captivated by the diverse human communities that flying foxes find themselves and their futures

tangled up with in contemporary Australia. Around this vast continent, flying foxes are simultaneously cherished and despised. As such, the book explores the long and ongoing history of flying foxes' violent persecution by orchardists and others, the loss of their key habitat, and the emerging impacts of climate change. Debbie tells the story of how "cruelty and its allies" have rendered flying foxes disposable, setting up ongoing, self-perpetuating processes of mass killing: vortexes of death in which connectivities unravel and mutualities falter (150). These threats have together imperiled the lives of countless individual flying foxes and are today pushing their species ever further toward the edge of extinction. But the human–flying fox relationships that most captivated Debbie, and that are the central focus of this book, are those that seek to intervene in, to challenge and resist, all this death. Ultimately, it is a set of stories told *against* mass death, in fidelity with life, in celebration of the waves of ancestral power that are our living world.

From *Dingo Makes Us Human* to *Shimmer*, Debbie's writing retained the character of a careful meditation that is both celebration and lamentation. In different ways and in company with different voices and creatures, her work is a cry of love, passion, and outrage in the face of the ongoing death work of our times, a period that Debbie recognized as characterized by entwined processes of colonization and environmental destruction, of genocide and ecocide. But it is also an effort to imagine, honor, and enact other possibilities for living and dying well. These are the issues that animated Debbie's life and writing. Drawn into a world of more-than-human kinship right at the outset of her career, she spent the remainder of her life working to understand, acknowledge, and keep faith with such a world.

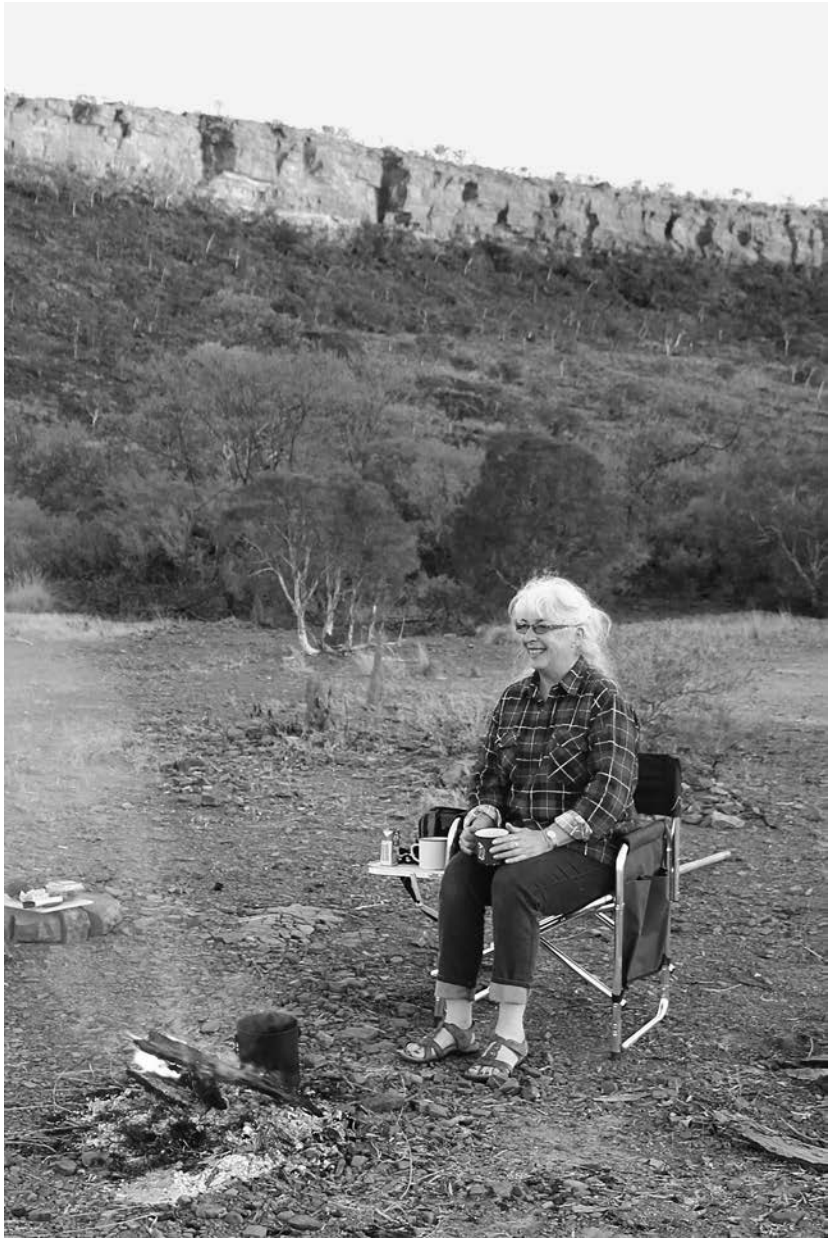
AT THE HEART OF DEBBIE'S OWN EFFORT to inhabit this world of kin was her understanding of the work of storytelling. She insisted that stories do not just recount connectivities; they also weave new ones. They are about forging relationships, about learning to see and understand, and, as a result, about being drawn into new obligations and responsibilities. There are no abstract ethical systems here; instead, as Debbie put it: "Stories themselves have the potential to promote understandings of embodied, relational, contingent ethics," to "pull readers into ethical proximity" (Rose 2013, 9). Through the slow, careful work of paying attention to the world—in our own or others' stories—we come to understand, to be connected, to be redone, in ways that just might enable better possibilities for living.

But she also knew that the power of stories is very far from being absolute. She argued that even if there is only death, even if nothing is to be gained through "writing into the great unmaking" (Rose 2013, 8), there is still an obligation to take up this work. In another aspect of her work profoundly indebted to philosophers and writers of the Shoah, she insisted on the importance of storytelling in the mode of witnessing, of refusing to turn away from suffering, from violence, from injustice, an act of "keeping faith" (Rose 2011). To refuse to turn away, she argued, was "to remain true to the lives within which ours are entangled, whether or not we can accomplish great change" (Rose 2013, 9). To turn away, to disavow, to forget: all are modes of abandonment that must be resisted in times of colonization and extinctions when living beings and their ways of life are under threat en masse.

These senses of the ethical importance of storytelling—as a mode of connection and avowal—ground much of Debbie's later work. In this way, her writings are not simply *about* ethics; they are in themselves ethical acts, efforts to interrupt the relentless momentum of death work to make a space for something else. They are efforts to relay the witness of massacres and land theft, to summon a pack of dogs into this difficult space, to evoke the fragile beauty of flying fox camps and flights.

In no small way, Debbie's work provided the foundation for the interdisciplinary environmental humanities in Australia and has in turn been profoundly influential in shaping the field around the world. She articulated a vision of the environmental humanities as a passionate and engaged space of scholarship. She did this in her own writing but also in her stewardship of the field as a founding editor of the journal *Environmental Humanities*, as a convenor of early conferences and workshops, and as a supervisor of numerous PhD students and postdocs and a collaborator with junior and senior colleagues.

Through her body of work, Debbie modeled a scholarship that was committed to life: to exploring the living world in its beauty and its challenges and to making a stand for flourishing, for inclusive possibilities. She opened up space for the next generation to write, think, and research in new ways. Put simply, her work was animated by and aimed to draw us all into a kind of "world-craziness." Adopting and adapting Shestov's thinking, she called for us to turn toward the earth: "to cherish birth and growth, and to love that which is perilous. . . . World-craziness immerses us in the power, resilience, connectivity, and uncertainty of the living Earth" (Rose 2011, 118).



1.2 Debbie camping at Jasper Gorge near Yarralin and Lingarra in 2012. PHOTO BY DARRELL LEWIS.

This passionate scholarship is grounded in the insights and commitments of Indigenous and decolonial thought, of feminist philosophy, of multispecies and more-than-human perspectives. In short, it is a scholarship that insists that "the environment" is from the outset relational and, so, ethical. The task, as Debbie often put it, quoting Val Plumwood, was "to resituate the human in ecological terms, and . . . to resituate the non-human in ethical terms" (Rose 2015, 3). This is an understanding of connectivity that works against the clichéd notion that everything is connected to everything and that instead insists on attention to the specificity of the multispecies kinships that hold us together: dependent on, vulnerable to, and responsible to one another. At the heart of her philosophy is an insistence that there is no outside to connectivity—only the arrogant delusion of attempts to occupy such a position of detachment and control.

She modeled this engaged attachment with a generative and imaginative philosophical style. There is a deliberate generosity in her scholarship as she invites diverse thinkers, understandings, and stories into company with each other. Sometimes these encounters are staged by her in the text, perhaps as a gathering around a campfire. At other times they take place less explicitly. Always, however, she is interested to see what sparks of creativity and possibility might be struck. In this way, her writing is an effort to both tell and dwell with stories in a way that works against closure, "keeping the wisdom rolling, allowing it to accumulate, and refraining from declaring final meanings" (Rose 2011, 15).

This collection seeks to continue and extend this generous and generative dimension of Debbie's character and approach. Instead of writing *about* Debbie and her work, the chapters in this book think *with* her and her many powerful contributions; they are pieces of original scholarship rather than summaries or discussions of her work. In practice, this means that the chapters draw on or are guided by Debbie's writing in a substantial way but equally draw it into conversation with new places and themes. In this way, this book both celebrates Debbie's existing body of work and opens up the scope for her remarkable thought and writing to reach out into the world and continue to transform understandings and practices. Whatever the path by which its contributors have emerged from or engaged with the many fields that Debbie worked within and between, they—like her—seek to think across and athwart disciplines. Their work coheres in its grounding in a relatively consistent set of methods and styles, each of them drawing on a combination of ethnographic, philosophical, literary, and historical approaches. Perhaps most important, the contributors all share Debbie's commitment to scholarly

writing as an ethical praxis grounded in careful attention to the particular, to a world of diverse human and other-than-human lives bound up in relationships of interdependence and obligation. In short, they are writing within and for a world of kin.

NOTES

1. For more information on Debbie's biography, see van Dooren (2020); Muecke (2020).

2. Deborah Bird Rose, unpublished interview conducted by Thom van Dooren, September 26, 2018.

3. Rose, unpublished interview.

4. Rose, unpublished interview.

5. On the traps, challenges, and necessity of such dialogue, see Rose (1988).

6. Rose, unpublished interview.

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