

Deborah Bird Rose  
**Participation**

01/08

### Multicultural Worlds

In 1980 I travelled from the USA to Australia to find an Aboriginal settlement where people would allow me to learn about their way of life by living with them and participating in community life. The people who agreed to host my ethnographic research lived in Yarralin and Lingara, two small communities located in the open savannah woodlands of the Northern Territory, and within the watershed of the Wickham River.

Yarralin people established their autonomous community in 1973 after they had walked off the cattle stations (ranches) that had dominated their lives for over seven decades. In 1980 a few members of this group decided to start another community, Lingara, where they could be in closer contact with their own country. The Lingara group (locally known as a “mob”) were particularly welcoming and I learned a great deal from them. I went back and forth between the two communities, as did they, and in my writing I refer to them collectively, for convenience, as Yarralin people. This region was colonized by the cattle industry, and the older Aboriginal people I met had survived massacres, dispossession, and ongoing cruelty. Women, men, and children had worked for decades without pay. They were given modest amounts of food and clothing, and they were also given a measure of protection from the predatory violence of frontier capitalism, including state-managed punitive control over most aspects of Aboriginal people’s lives.<sup>1</sup> Individuals were not citizens, they did not have even the basic protections of citizens, and for decades they were the unfree and unpaid backbone of the cattle industry. As good workers in a skilled and physically demanding industry, they were respected; at the same time, and by the same people, they were denigrated as “Blackfellas.” They were given the autonomy to pursue their own ways of life seasonally, when they were not needed as a labor force, and so their own country-based knowledge informed their lives. Within people’s own lived experience, they necessarily came to understand the injurious contradictions of this enclosed bifurcated social world: as Aboriginal people they were the ultimate others against whom white settlers measured their superiority, and as such they were always refused a place at the table. At the same time, the two groups lived in close proximity, and there were allowable, albeit often contested, types of intimacy, primarily between white men and black women. People in both groups shared a thin layer of culture focused on cattle, and on local knowledge of landscape, climate, place-names, and language sufficient for communication. Both groups recognized

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Black flying fox, *Pteropus alecto*, feeding on a palm tree in Brisbane, Australia, 2014. Photo: Andrew Mercer. License: Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International.

unspoken rules surrounding their separation and their intimacies. Violence was pervasive but was not the only story, and kindness existed from time to time, along with respect for skill and strength.<sup>2</sup>

The people I met at Yarralin were survivors in that very precise sense of being people whose forebears had been slaughtered. As a mode of resistance as well as a matter of survival, they had maintained their inner dignity and a vast domain of knowledge and remembrance, phrased often as “Law.” Fidelity to Law was and is the ground of resistance. There was much to resist. Genocide and ecocide have been the paired modes of devastation inflicted on Indigenous people and country in many parts of the world, and because people and country are so deeply intermeshed, harm amplifies into wider ripples of degradation and suffering.<sup>3</sup> Along with attacks on people, there had been attacks on native animals and plants; some were deliberate, and many were side effects of settler methods of land and water use. There was much loss, including local extirpations. Yarralin people continue to oppose the ongoing war against nature. They look at country and see waste on a massive scale. The man whose driving energy made the shift to Lingara possible, Riley Young, gave tough and evocative expression to this experience: “Why don’t you [whitefellas] think back to that Law? You’ve been enough wasting, shooting people from his country. Because White men come out and made a big mess now. You can see: paddock gone [eroded], grader gone cutting all around. Wasting. Wasting ground.”<sup>4</sup>

Aboriginal people became citizens in 1967, and with greater freedom, they were planning to make better lives for themselves, their young generations, and their country. At that time the Australian nation was promoting measures of restorative justice, including land rights, that encouraged optimism. People’s first priority once they were free of the oppressive and restrictive conditions that had marked the previous decades was to live in their own country, close to their ancestors, their sacred sites, and their sources of life and meaning. Law and responsibility were located in country, and they needed to be present.

The fidelity that had sustained people through the long years of occupation was focused on the wide group of “countrymen”: the term includes men as well as women, nonhumans as well as humans, the dead as well as the living. When the Lingara group moved back to their own country they were, for the first time in close to a hundred years, able to live not as subordinates of whitefellas but as *ngurra mala*, glossed as “boss for country” or “traditional owners.” The oldest of the men explained the

ethic of fidelity that held them in place and gave meaning to their lives: “The Wickham River is filled with blood of Blackfellas killed in those days. Their bones are all broken up along the bottom ... We are camping now on the blood of Aboriginal people killed in those days.”

For the most part, it is the senior people in Aboriginal societies who have the responsibility of teaching others. I was deeply desirous of being taught, and many of the Lawmen and Lawwomen took up the task. The people who took me into their protective care were wise and knowledgeable, and very tough. Having gained a measure of freedom, they were most focused on their own objectives, but at the same time they well understood the power of the written word, and the potential role of outsiders who shared their goals of self-determination. Older people had been denied Western education, and while they sought to ensure that their children would learn to read and write, they also enlisted willing outsiders into the project of making their stories, understandings, commitments, and aspirations more widely known. The Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976, along with Aboriginal Sacred Sites Protection Legislation (1979), opened up new cross-cultural legal encounters in which anthropologists could put their learning to work for Aboriginal people. In the end I did not go back to the USA; there was too much good work to be done in Australia.<sup>5</sup>

Yarralin itself has changed enormously since my first encounters starting in 1980. There are more people, more houses and other amenities, and many more outside officials.<sup>6</sup> Government policies have shifted from the empowering vision of self-determination to a darker model of discipline and punishment. Yarralin is not a happier place, but it is still a place of strong people with strong knowledge, and incredible determination.<sup>7</sup>

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I arrived in Yarralin in September when the sun was intense and the savannah glowed golden and silver. Dark lines of dense growth etched out the billabongs, rivers, and creeks. All that brightness! I was captured by red soil and mesas, by glimmering waves of grass, sparkling trees, and by the huge sky that held it all, and that seemingly would go on holding it all, forever.

One of the great delights on those hot evenings in 1980 was watching flying foxes come forth from their camp further upstream. Their huge bat-like shapes stood out sharply against the deepening sky as thousands and thousands of them flew above us, following the river for a while, and then fanning out over the vast open woodlands. The Eucalypts were flowering, and the flying foxes were feasting on nectar. I had read about these creatures in various

ethnographies, but I hadn't quite imagined what it would be like to live in their neighborhood. I was awestruck. With time I learned about their place in Yarralin people's cultural world. As Dreamings they were shape-shifters, metamorphic creators, and much of the country around Yarralin and Lingara was marked by their tracks, stories, and sacred sites. I came to recognize flying foxes as totemic kin and as ecological communicators, and to appreciate the unique enthusiasm they bring to life. I joined some of my hosts in eating them from time to time, until in due course, as I will explain, I stopped eating them.

During one of these exquisite flyouts, the Lawman Daly Pulkara pointed out something interesting. The crowd flew over, and then, after the majority were well on their way, a few turned back. A bit later, stragglers appeared, following the others but not quite catching up. Daly explained: "The old people always said those blokes forgot their axes." I felt like a bit of a straggler myself as I tried to catch the drift of his words. I had to remind myself that in the beginning, in creation, they swapped back and forth between human and flying-fox forms, and when they were men they would have carried axes. "They're always like that," Daly said, "one or two are back behind. That's why the old people said they forgot their axes, they had to go back to camp and get them."

Sentience is integral. In the literature, Indigenous people's recognition of widespread sentience is often termed "animism." The term conveys both an account of life and an ethics for life: animism is defined as the recognition "that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others." It follows that the appropriate mode of engagement with nonhumans entails "learning to act respectfully (carefully and constructively) towards and among other persons."<sup>8</sup> Within an animist understanding of reality, flying foxes are persons, and like any group of persons there is variety; some are a bit sloppy, dragging along behind, forgetting their axes when they go out foraging, always a bit out of step.

Yarralin people use the term "culture" to name these specific ways of life. Mindful creatures have and live in their own manner. The evidence all around them shows that other beings have and follow their own lifeways. They have their own foods, foraging methods, forms of sociality and seasonality; they have their own languages; if we cannot understand their languages, this is not surprising; we cannot understand all human languages. But it goes further than language. One of the Lawmen explained: "Birds got ceremony of their own –

brolga, turkey, crow, hawk, white and black cockatoo – all got ceremony, women's side, men's side, everything." Here, too, evidence abounds. Brolgas (large cranes) are a great example: they have a red patch on their head, and thus look as if painted for ceremony; they perform a dance that is mesmerizing in its intensity. Other animals, other lifeways; the presumption is that while we humans never witness more than a fraction of what others do, we know on the basis of what we do encounter that they lead richly interesting and diverse lives. This is not a matter of belief but rather of observation. Life is immensely diverse and fascinating in this multispecies, multicultural social world. Many creatures are held in high regard because of their unique abilities, and humor is there as well. Indeed, laughing about the odd and sometimes goofy things animals did was part of the pleasure of paying attention to the great diversity of living things.

This multispecies, multicultural world is participatory all the way through. Human subjects encounter other creaturely subjects, and to experience life, to actually *be alive*, is to share in and contribute to the liveliness of the world.

### Kindreds

One of the founders of the Lingara mob was a fellow named Old Toby. He was close to eighty years old when I met him, and had lived through a brutal history. A short rake of a man, his bowed legs testified to a life on horseback and implied years of hard work: mustering, throwing cattle, branding, breaking in horses, droving. Like many people in the cattle industry, he walked a bit unevenly as the result of various injuries over the years. With his beat-up cowboy hat, Western shirt, blue jeans, and smart belt, along with an engaging smile and a certain wariness, he was a classic stockman of the outback. At the same time, he was a knowledgeable Elder, a Lawman, and a leader in local Aboriginal life.

Before I could get to know him well, Old Toby died. And when he died, the word went out: no one was to kill flying foxes. Not in Lingara, not in Yarralin, and not in any of the surrounding communities where people shared Law and ceremony. It was a serious edict affecting all of us, humans and flying foxes, and it would last until the bereaved relations told us that we could again go hunting. A righteous penalty for breaking this Law was death. Old Toby was a flying-fox man, which is to say that he was a flesh and blood participant in a cross-species kindred (kin group) comprised of other flying-fox people and flying foxes themselves. The quality of kinship entailed mutual solidarity. As the group suffered, so no further suffering could be

inflicted until there had been time to recover.

Aboriginal people in Australia have developed one of the world's most elaborate systems of multispecies kinship. Anthropologists apply the term "totemism" to these kindreds.<sup>9</sup> The term may be misleading insofar as it might seem to imply that the human group is symbolized by, or in some way represented by, its totem. This is not how multispecies kindreds are understood in Australia. The relationship between human and nonhuman members of the group is, in most instances, one of shared substance or co-substantiality, meaning that some of the substance of their bodies is shared through descent from their common ancestors. Something of flying-fox bodily substance is within the bodies of flying-fox people, and vice versa.<sup>10</sup> Their lives are bound up with each other, and what happens to one affects others; risks to one are risks to all, and the well-being of each is enmeshed in the well-being of others. The person who exists in others, and in whom others exist, is vulnerable to what happens outside their own skin, but, equally, they find their power in the relationships that are situated beyond the skin. They participate in the well-being, as well as the suffering, of kin.

An excellent definition of Aboriginal

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Australian totemism is that it connects beings through "bonds of mutual life-giving."<sup>11</sup> Participation in these powerful bonds can be understood through the logic of multispecies participatory flows. A first principle is connectivity: life always depends on and is lived within relationship with others. A second is that the mode of relationship is kinship – there are those to whom you are related, and there are many others to whom you are not related. Third, the encompassing frame of kinship articulates an ethics – there are mutual responsibilities across species and other beings. Fourth, kinship is expressed in structured bonds of enduring intergenerational, interspecies participatory solidarity.<sup>12</sup> Kinship is both a structure that is perpetuated through time and an ethics of practice that gives substance and meaning to the structure. While the structure is founded in descent, the substance is always being formed anew through nurturing care. The process is circular: bonds of mutual life-giving congeal as kinship, and kinship calls forth bonds of mutual life-giving.<sup>13</sup>

The system I discuss here is not the only system in Australia, but it is especially interesting, I think, because of its cross-cutting patterns and connections. Through shifting



Cattle at Anthony's Lagoon, Northern Territory, circa 1905. The History Trust of South Australia, accession number GN02698. License: Creative Commons CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication.

patterns, the system resists self-enclosure and holds itself open widely and unpredictably to ongoing life. It positively revels in diversities. One type of multispecies kin groups is country based. These kindreds started with the Dreamings and their original work of creation. As the great creation ancestors travelled, they left groups of descendants who were situated in country and are now known as countrymen. For example, from the Emu ancestors come emu humans and emu birds – the emu countrymen; from the Possum ancestors come humans and possums – another group of countrymen, and so on across Australia. The system in which everyone belongs to country and to a group of countrymen has the potential to produce a set of competing singularities with boundaries that obstruct flow and limit participation. However, this potential is not realized because any given boundary is cross-cut by other boundaries. This point may be clearest when we think of the straightforward example of marriage and descent. Countrymen do not marry each other but rather must look to other countries for husbands and wives. Two people who marry are different; they must be different in order to marry. We can think of them as Emu man and Possum woman. As with incest in strictly human terms, marriage requires moving outside the natal family. In generational terms, the children are Emu in relation to their father and his country, and they are Possums in relation to their mother and her country. The outcome is a series of country-based groups: the nightjar people and birds who belong to the country sung into life by the Emu Dreaming ancestor, for example. Equally, though, this unity is not hegemonic. It can be broken up, and other unities formed; in this case, amongst possums.<sup>14</sup>

Alongside the country-based kindreds, there is a different, strictly matrilineal system; it is differently embodied and its focus is not on country. The two types add to the complexities of interacting kindreds but do not compete; they mesh at times, but function with efferent effects. Country-based kinship carries rights and responsibilities that are physically located in country and borders. The matrilineal type is located in bodies; it entails rights and responsibilities located in embodied kinship and broader scales of ecological interactions. The flying-fox kindred, of which Old Toby was a member, is matrilineal. Local terminology for this type (*ngurlu*) indicates “flesh” or “body.” The flying-fox members of the kindred are all *warrpa*, aka, the black species of flying fox (*Pteropus alecto*). A person is born a flying fox because their mother was a flying fox. All of a woman’s children share her flesh, but only her daughters pass it on to the next generation. Here, too, people must find spouses in other kindreds. This

system is focused on the actual fleshy bodies of the individuals who instantiate the kindred. As a general rule, people do not eat their nonhuman countrymen. But nor do they hoard. Rather, human responsibilities for the well-being of others include the obligation to perform ceremonies and other actions that keep the nonhuman members of the kindred healthy and thriving; the work benefits the kindred, and it benefits other humans in other kindreds. Everyone has to eat, and hunting is a joy, but at the same time everyone knows that the creatures they eat are someone’s kin. The obligation is thus to refrain from being wasteful or disrespectful. In a world of kin, care of one sort or another is always required; others are paying attention. Furthermore, if humans believe that their kin are not faring well they have the right and duty to prohibit hunting until the species’ prospects improve. Thus, in addition to the relatively random prohibitions brought about by human death, there is also the work of monitoring nonhumans and managing humans.

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The animal who is your kin is called your *warpiri*. In the context of *ngurlu*, Daly Pulkara explained the meaning this way: *warpiri* is your “biggest sorry” (your greatest sorrow). In my words, *warpiri* is YOUR GRIEF. Your flesh and blood, flowing through the bodies of others who will be hunted, is *your* grief. You don’t have to grieve over everything; you couldn’t. But here, in this place of encounter with the necessary deaths of others, your grief may become extreme and so may your anger. If these deaths come about in defiance of Law, righteous anger is directed to those who have not managed death properly.

The question thus arises as to what it means to manage death properly. As we saw with Old Toby and the flying foxes, a hunting taboo is placed on the *ngurlu* species after the death of a human member of the kindred. This was serious, and the Law was respected. I was involved with one event that focused my attention on breaches of Law. It happened shortly after the death of a prominent emu man in a nearby community. The recently deceased emu guy was not old, and he had died suddenly; people were still getting over the shock. Throughout the region no one was to kill emus until the emu people said it would be okay. Deep in their grief, they had not yet lifted the taboo. But, on a trip from Lingara to Yarralin we spotted an emu near the road and pulled up because one of the men, a flying-fox guy named Morgan, wanted to take a shot at it. The Elders were against this, but Morgan grabbed the gun and shot. The emu was wounded, and the children all jumped out of the truck and raced to kill the animal. After considerable excitement



with sticks, stones, guns, a wounded emu, shouting children, and barking dogs, the emu was “finished” and brought back to the truck. All the way home Morgan protested that he had not meant to shoot the emu. The Elders were worried, and their discussions focused on chastising Morgan, and on figuring out whom to give the emu to. Its death had been unlawful; this was not a random act of violence; emu people’s grief would soon turn to anger and all of us in the truck were to some degree implicated. Morgan was way outside the Law; we in the truck were involved by proximity (at the least), and we were in difficulty. Embroiled in Law-defying action, we were wrong-footed, culpable, and exposed to angry grieving people who wanted vengeance. We couldn’t hide the dead bird, nor, worse yet, throw it away. We needed help from the very people whose kin had been killed because they held the power of life and death; their anger was wild in its intensity and would quickly become focused on its target (us). In the end we took the now dangerous emu body to one of the oldest Yarralin Lawmen, who fortunately had an emu connection through his wife, and he undertook the perilous work of butchering and cooking it.

Morgan always maintained that the death had been an accident, and when others suggested that it was not much of an accident to have loaded the gun, pointed it at the emu, and pulled the trigger, he reminded people that the gun had no sights and that its value in hunting was a complete joke. It was a pretty steamy time while people considered Morgan’s actions. He was respected in most other contexts of his life, and over time people stepped back from holding his impulsive actions against him. But in that time when the Law was breached and the anger was palpable, reparative action seemed to be a far horizon. His own kin had to acknowledge that he was in the wrong, and at the same time they had to find ways to extricate him from life-threatening peril. The emu people had the right to kill him with impunity, as he had killed one of their kin. The negotiations towards reparations and reconciliation were complex and were not part of the public record.<sup>15</sup>

Clearly, kin groups may become sites of violent emotions and actions, and, inevitably, life is never free of human passions, including those that are harmful. Perfection is not a goal and nor is the suppression of human emotion and vitality. The key point is that, broadly and sustainably, the effect of these great concentrations of diversities and responsibilities is to spread care across many species in a structured manner from which, in the best of times, everyone benefits.

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The system of matrilineal kinship, *ngurlu*, is

not specifically country based, but rather opens out to wider cosmic scales and relationships. By “cosmic” I refer to events, processes, actions, and relationships that unfold widely across earth systems and beyond. The movement of stars and constellations, for example, and the pulses of drought and flood: there are actions and patterns that while experienced locally arise from much wider systems. One of the main wide-scale divisions is between rain and sun, wet and dry. A person on the rain side would preferentially marry a person on the dry side, thus bringing together the two great climatic forces that generate the flourishing health of country. Flying foxes are a great example: they are intimately connected with dark rain and thus with the rainy season, and are complementary to dry-season kindreds such as, for example, emus. Ultimately, they are deeply associated with the powerful, world-sustaining Rainbow Snake, the great driver of rains and the generation of life. They are implicated in the motion of seasons, the flowering of savannah trees, and the health and nutritional generosity of country. Thus, through a multiplicity of forms, and multiplicity of scales, life comes forth in dizzyingly diverse participatory proximities of cross-cutting, kin-based, co-substantive bonds of mutual life-giving. Participation is complex and is always oriented both towards others as well as towards one’s own. In this system, living beings truly stand or fall together.

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Excerpted from chapter 4 of Deborah Bird Rose, *Shimmer: Flying Fox Exuberance in Worlds of Peril* (Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming 2022).

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**Deborah Bird Rose** (1946–2018) was an anthropologist and leading figure in the interdisciplinary environmental humanities. Her books include *Hidden Histories* (1991), *Dingo Makes Us Human* (1992), *Nourishing Terrains* (1996), *Country of the Heart* (2002), *Reports from a Wild Country* (2004), and *Wild Dog Dreaming* (2011). For most of her career Rose was based at the Australian National University (1995–2008) and Macquarie University (2008–2013).

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1  
Such control was labelled “protection.”

2  
The best account of the decades of cattle station life, when people were “prisoners in their own country,” is offered in Hobbles Danaiyarri, “The Saga of Captain Cook,” in *Australia’s Empire*, ed. Deryck Schreuder and Stuart Ward (Oxford University Press, 2008); Deborah Bird Rose, “The Saga of Captain Cook: Morality in Aboriginal and European Law,” *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, no. 2 (1984).

3  
See Donald Grinde and Bruce Johansen, *Ecocide of Native America: Environmental Destruction of Indian Lands and Peoples* (Clear Light Publishers, 1995).

4  
See Deborah Bird Rose, *Hidden Histories: Black Stories from Victoria River Downs, Humbert River, and Wave Hill Stations* (Aboriginal Studies Press, 1991), 245.

5  
As I gained experience in Land Rights’ hearings, I worked on about eighteen land claims (including disputes) across the Northern Territory, from the deserts to the Gulf of Carpentaria. I worked with Yarralin people on their claims to land, and on registering sacred sites. Some of these claims took years to resolve, but the legislation came with a sunset clause, and that phase of restorative justice is now finished. See Deborah Bird Rose, “Country for Yarralin,” July 7, 2016 <https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20190725101448/http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/177305/20190725-1730/deborahbirdrose.com/2016/07/07/country-for-yarralin/index.html>.

6  
Between 1980 and 2018 the percentage of whitefellas jumped from .025 percent to 8.6 percent. Amenities increased, and so too, in keeping with government policy, did the scrutiny, oversight, and control. For a discussion of government policy, see Deborah Bird Rose, “Remembrance, in the Wake of Suicide,” March 28, 2016 <https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20190725101448/http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/177305/20190725-1730/deborahbirdrose.com/2016/03/28/remembrance-in-the-wake-of-suicide/index.html>.

7  
I have written extensively on these matters in other publications. See Rose, *Hidden Histories*; *Dingo Makes Us Human: Life and Land in an Australian Aboriginal Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 1992); *Reports From a Wild Country: Ethics of Decolonisation* (University of New South Wales

Press, 2004); and *Wild Dog Dreaming: Love and Extinction* (University of Virginia Press, 2011).

8  
Graham Harvey, *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (Columbia University Press, 2006), xi. See also *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism*, ed. Graham Harvey (Routledge, 2015).

9  
The term originates in the Ojibwa language of North America.

10  
Fiona Magowan, *Melodies of Mourning: Music and Emotion in Northern Australia* (University of Western Australia Press, 2007). She uses the term “mutual indwelling” to identify some of the deep implications of co-substantiality.

11  
A. P. Elkin, *The Australian Aborigines: How to Understand Them* (Angus and Robertson, 1954), 133.

12  
In classic anthropology the emphasis is primarily on biological descent. More nuanced approaches which emphasize kinship as an outcome of nurturing relationships provide a balance to the earlier emphasis on descent.

13  
Kinship is one of the perennial topics in the disciplines of anthropology. On the matter of considering both practice and structures, see, for example, David Schneider, *A Critique of the Study of Kinship* (University of Michigan Press, 1984); also Maximilian Holland, *Social Bonding and Nurture Kinship: Compatibility between Cultural and Biological Approaches* (CreateSpace Press, 2012).

14  
This is not a complete analysis of the complexities. For greater detail, see Rose, *Dingo Makes Us Human*.

15  
This story is recounted in greater detail in Rose, *Dingo Makes Us Human*, 83–85.