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Love and the Dingo

Deborah Bird Rose. *Wild Dog Dreaming: Love and Extinction*. Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2011. 184 pp. \$29.50 hc, \$16.50 pb.

The most effective agent in the extinction of species is the pressure of other species. (A.R. Wallace, *Island Life*. London: Macmillan, 1895)

The cover of *Wild Dog Dreaming* features a tinted black and white photograph of a young dingo in outback Queensland. The gaze and stance of the animal implies uncertainty, as if he or she is lost and appealing for help to the human taking the photo. However, Rose's book is not so much about the dingo as a species and the many dilemmas and arguments that proliferate around this animal's continued existence in Australia, as it is about the book's subtitle: the concepts of love and extinction.

An uneasy connection between the figure on the cover and the title of the book may not be immediately apparent to readers, whether familiar with Australian fauna or not. Dingoes arrived in the country about 4,000 years ago, probably from Asia with waves of human migration, but their future as a pure breed is now threatened by interbreeding with "feral" domestic dogs. The term "wild dog" refers to dogs introduced by European settlers, dingoes, and their hybrids. The specific extinction Rose writes about in this book presumably concerns the animals whose DNA is identified with the original immigrants from Asia. Most of these animals are on Fraser Island off the north east coast of Australia, where they are prevented from breeding with other dogs. Some remote populations are also considered close to "pure," but systematic DNA testing to support this claim is difficult.¹ "Dreaming," as Rose tells us, is used by indigenous Aborigines to refer to what is understood in their world view as "the creators, the origins, the process of creation, the continuities of coming into being and coming into pattern" (11).

While some of these terms and ideas may not be fully discussed, by the end of the book the significance of both Aboriginal cultural values and the ideas of a number of Western philosophers and ecologists in regard to extinction has been thoroughly explored. *Wild Dog Dreaming* offers a rare, positive approach to considering the difficult and deeply concerning phenomenon of global extinctions in the Anthropocene. Rose writes with heartfelt conviction from the perspective of history, ethics, religion and philosophy. She

makes her case with reference to the place of animals (human and nonhuman) in relation to each other and the biosphere. The book is meditative and reflective, rather than analytical, and Rose is in no doubt about the responsibilities of humans to the occupants of the Earth and appeals to her readers to embrace life, with all its complexities and contradictions.

She begins her book with a second compelling image: the skinned bodies of dingoes hanging by their hind feet from a tree not far from Canberra, the national capital of Australia. The sight of this “strange fruit” deeply affects her. Dingoes and creation stories provide a touchstone throughout the book while she refers to her Aboriginal teacher Old Tim and the thoughts of a range of Western philosophers. Rose hopes at least to begin to “mend the world” (5), and to this end includes a series of very personal stories, with her experiences related in a tone that is conversational and even confidential — it is accessible writing. While her intended audience is obviously more than academic, the bulk of her book discusses the sometimes weighty and disparate views of, among others, Emmanuel Levinas, Donna Haraway, Val Plumwood, Robyn Eckersley, Michael Soulé, Martin Heidegger, and Lev Shestov. Later, the custom of talking around a campfire is used to bring these thinkers together in a discussion that “keeps the stories rolling.” Rose is not looking for final meanings, but letting “the flow of ideas take them into new places” (15).

These and other conversations raise ethical questions related to the problem of species extinction. She asks, how do animal deaths relate to human death — particularly massacre, genocide, and mass slaughter? The reality of animal death is confronted with an equanimity not often found in theoretical books in a passage where the dead body of a hunted animal is being prepared to be eaten. Rose’s response to the heat and smell of the body is almost identical to my reaction in a similar situation, when a just-caught rabbit was skinned and quartered on a cracked glass table in a shack by the beach. It is a scene I remember with great clarity, so suddenly in touch with the sensory details and undeniable facts of this kind of death. The lesson here is that the industrialized killing of animals in Western society and the distance we then have from them is echoed in the remoteness of extinction to our daily lives: isolated glimpses of polar bears on television reinforces indifference.

Resistance to looking the animal in the face and confronting the difficult questions associated with human-animal relations is dealt with through a discussion of Levinas’s essay “Name of a Dog.” Rose anguishes over the inability of Levinas to connect with the

dog Bobby as an ethical, communicable being. She notes the strength of the human/animal boundary in Western thought — “the tyranny of the abstract over the living reality of the world” (31) — and what she sees as the strengthening of these barriers by science. She feels that Levinas maintains the boundary between animals and humans — even in the face of his love for the dog Bobby — to save the Idea of Man, as well as the Idea of God (40). This failure is an emptiness, a disappointment, that Rose finds profoundly disturbing. She compares this erasure to the attitude of David Lurie toward the dog who forms a bond with him in J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* and sees his turning away from the animal’s fate as the “disgrace” of the book’s title.

A significant portion of *Wild Dog Dreaming* is devoted to a discussion of ideas about God, the Bible, and the absence of certainty in the present era. While talking of loneliness, despair, existentialism (which she perceives as appearing with the absence or death of God) and the breaking down of dualisms — for instance, the boundary between nature and culture — new questions arise concerning our relation to nonhuman animals. Some queries that Rose poses are: If we are like them, do we lose our sense of having a unique origin and destiny? If we are not like them, are we isolated? To whom are we accountable? Who are we with them, and then again, who are we without them? (48). Interspersed with these considerations are stories from the dry and remote Simpson Desert and Rose’s conversations and walks with Aboriginal men from the Yarralin community in Australia’s Northern Territory. Old Tim has a particularly rich connection with dingoes through shared kinship, a wealth of creation stories, and “a passionate attachment” to his wild dogs. These passages bring both specific instances of what she talks about in other parts of the book and universality to her discussion. Again and again the importance of human-animal connection, entanglement, symbiosis, mutuality, webs of exchanges, and interdependence are stressed. She points out the urgency of recognizing these connections as the Earth faces potentially catastrophic changes in climate and the extinction of a great number of animals and plants. Aboriginal culture, beliefs and practices are a constant example of alternative ways of thinking about and living in the land, while also offering a different way of managing human life and death.

There are also facts and assessments about the place of dingoes in white Australian and ecological contexts — dingo fences, poisoning techniques and the attitudes of pastoralists, the dingo’s howl and possible extinction, the role of dingoes as apex predators in maintaining biodiversity, and the effect of habitat clearing. But, more often, Rose veers away from current issues concerning specific human-animal interactions, such as dingo attacks on humans, the eating of dingoes by Aboriginal people, attitudes

to interbreeding, and the significance of the idea of pure breed dingoes. One of the other absences from Rose's book is any mention of the very recent extinction of the thylacine, a native forerunner of the dingo in Australia. Many scientists believe that competition from dingoes resulted in the disappearance of thylacines from mainland Australia, while the species survived on the island of Tasmania where the dingo did not exist, although this is not conclusive. Evidence from Tasmania and mainland rock engravings suggest that the position of the dingo in the mainland biosphere and the treatment the species is now experiencing, along with their place in Aboriginal culture and the terms used to describe them, are strikingly similar to those encountered by the thylacine.

Necessary aspects of Rose's discussion are ideas of suffering and grief. As with other elements in the book, Biblical figures and commentaries, or Aboriginal ways of dealing with these issues, either introduce or are at the center of her dialogue. In Yarralin community the dropping of 1080-poison dingo bait by aircraft on their traditional land is perceived as an outrage and raises protests. 1080 poison is not only toxic to dingoes, but also to many other species. It can take 2-12 hours for an animal to die; it causes disorientation, muscle tremors and convulsions.² 1080 remains in the flesh and bones of the poisoned animals, which then becomes a problem when their bodies are eaten by scavengers. Rose is right to question indifference, power, and the paradoxes involved in this situation. While the few remaining pure breed dingoes are protected under some Australian State laws, hybrid and wild dog numbers are increasing and they can be shot on sight. The difficulty of determining one from the other where interbreeding continues makes the eradication of dingoes both likely, and an implied rather than explicit desire. Rose returns to Levinas via Michael Fagenblat's statement that he ends up with "an ethics that is so impassive, indeed formal, that it risks itself becoming pure theory" (quoted on 103) and by this circuitous route comes back, quite surprisingly, to extinction. These webs of connection, in themselves, underscore the argument she is making. It is with immense skill and intelligence that this network of threads is woven, but Rose does not answer the questions that were on my lips: If dingoes are endangered — how many are left? What is the biological connection between dingoes and wild dogs? How does this connection relate to the idea of "extinction?" Likewise, the issues and problems involved in dingo conservation are left to be addressed by other writers and discovered by the reader.

A highlight of the book occurs in chapter 10, where there is an imaginary discussion with a group of philosophers, including Old Tim, around a campfire. Ilya Prigogine

says immutability is certain, predictable. Plumwood sees a connection between death and certainty, and says Plato was working towards an account of life that would sustain immortality in the face of death — modernity, of course, has “proved incapable of offering a life-affirming account of death” (114). Tim tells a story where one part of a human lives on after death. Shestov points out that death entails grief and loss, but Tim says it does not involve “nothingness” — the nihilism Shestov has written about. I particularly enjoyed the idea of Haraway’s dog, Cayenne, bounding into view with Donna: she has written about Heidegger’s “the Open,” a zone or process where humans come face to face with the nothingness that gives rise to Being. Haraway encounters animal others in “the Open” and she argues for “world making that affirms and enhances like in connectivity and without hierarchy” (117). The conversation closes with Shestov’s spirited response to God and the world: God-craziness . . .

One of the last chapters of Rose’s book begins to deal with humans as prey, but only in a historical sense: her indefatigable exuberance intervenes, so that observations slide into a discussion of the Bible’s Song of Songs, the metaphysics of love, sensuality and ecological erotics, and back to her thesis that connections are powerful: love and death exist in dynamic balance. The difficulties of perceiving and sustaining this balance are glaringly obvious in the stories that are currently being played out in Australia. In June 2012 the deputy coroner of the Northern Territory, with tears in her eyes, delivered the final verdict in what was probably the most fraught case of human/animal interaction in the country’s history. More than 30 years earlier, Lindy Chamberlain claimed her baby was taken from her tent by a dingo while the family were camping at Uluru, a red stone monolith in Central Australia that is a popular tourist site and sacred to the Anangu people of the area. However, she was charged with murdering her daughter Azaria and spent three years in jail. After many years of attempting to formally receive exoneration for her child’s death, this fourth inquest concluded that a dingo had, indeed, taken her baby.

Adrian Franklin, in an article “Dingoes in the Dock” published in a recent edition of *New Scientist*, anticipates how the Azaria Chamberlain finding might impact on conservation efforts for the dingo:

If the conservation movement insists on unrealistic conceptions of the dingo, as happened with Fraser Island, then the future of the species in Australia does not look good. Attacks may continue, with culling of problem animals the inevitable result.³

However, if it is finally accepted that a dingo killed Azaria, and that dingoes naturally have a complex repertoire of behaviors that include symbiotic and predatory associations with humans, then it can be assigned its place on the landscape as a dangerous animal and conserved as such animals are everywhere, with its separation from people given due weight.⁴

I have a quibble with one aspect of the book's publication that was perhaps outside the control of its author, but I think is worth mentioning. The publisher's "News Release" included with my copy is headed "WILD DOG DREAMING Animal Extinction: the Anomaly of Human-Driven Disaster." The release then claims that "The endangered dingo of Australia is not the first animal to face extinction, but its story is particularly disturbing as it is the first to be caused by a single species: our own." This failure to acknowledge the many species already driven to extinction by humans in this Anthropocene era — for example, the passenger pigeon in USA, the Falklands Islands wolf, the thylacine in Tasmania, the dodo in Mauritius — is disturbing, and I can only encourage authors to be vigilant in picking up errors such as this, perhaps made in haste or without fully understanding the text.

But this is a minor concern about a book that is sure to interest and inspire Rose's many admirers, as well as readers who access her writing for the first time. *Wild Dog Dreaming* proposes an attitude toward life and death that is challenging and invigorating: through coupling love and extinction humans may be able to make a difference — a unique answer to the sixth great extinction event and one of the most important problems of our time.

Notes

1. See Colong Foundation for Wilderness Nomination: <http://www.colongwilderness.org.au/files/pages/dingo-nom-text.pdf>
2. From a brochure *1080 & Dogs Don't Mix*, published by the Fox Free Taskforce, Tasmanian Department of Primary Industry, Water and Environment, which I picked up in the waiting room of my local veterinarian.
3. See Leah Burns *et al* on the subject of dingoes on Fraser Island, including the recommendation that an ecocentric ethic should be applied: it is human, as well as nonhuman animals, that need to be managed: Georgette Leah Burns and Peter Howard, "When Wildlife Tourism Goes Wrong: A Case Study Of Stakeholder and Management Issues Regarding Dingoes on Fraser Island, Australia." *Tourism Management* 24.6 (2003): 699-712

http://www98.griffith.edu.au/dspace/bitstream/handle/10072/6029/When_wildlife...?sequence=1 ; Georgette Leah Burns, Jim Macbeth and Susan Moore, "Should Dingoes Die? Principles for Engaging Ecocentric Ethics in Wildlife Tourism Management." *Journal of Ecotourism*, 10.3 (2011): 179-196.

4. Adrian Franklin, "Dingoes in the Dock." *New Scientist*, 20 February, 2012.