

2021

[Review] Deborah Bird Rose. *Shimmer: Flying Fox Exuberance in Worlds of Peril*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022. 240 pp.

Tessa Laird
University of Melbourne

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/asj>



Part of the Agricultural and Resource Economics Commons, Art and Design Commons, Art Practice Commons, Australian Studies Commons, Communication Commons, Creative Writing Commons, Digital Humanities Commons, Education Commons, English Language and Literature Commons, Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons, Film and Media Studies Commons, Fine Arts Commons, Legal Studies Commons, Linguistics Commons, Philosophy Commons, Political Science Commons, Public Health Commons, Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies Commons, Sociology Commons, and the Theatre and Performance Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

Laird, Tessa, [Review] Deborah Bird Rose. *Shimmer: Flying Fox Exuberance in Worlds of Peril*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022. 240 pp., *Animal Studies Journal*, 10(2), 2021, 228-234.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/asj/vol10/iss2/14>

**[Review] Deborah Bird Rose. *Shimmer: Flying Fox Exuberance in Worlds of Peril*.
Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022. 240 pp.**

Abstract

Animal Studies Journal 2021 10(2): [Review] Deborah Bird Rose. *Shimmer: Flying Fox Exuberance in Worlds of Peril*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022. 240 pp.

[Review] Deborah Bird Rose. *Shimmer: Flying Fox Exuberance in Worlds of Peril*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022. 240 pp.

Tessa Laird

University of Melbourne

Readers of this journal are probably familiar with Deborah Bird Rose, the American-born Australian anthropologist who worked closely with Yarralin people in the Northern Territory during the 1980s and 1990s, where she contributed to more than 20 land claims. Later in her academic career at ANU and Macquarie University, she became pivotal in the foundation of environmental humanities as a field of research in Australia and abroad. Towards the end of her life, she increasingly focussed on issues of multispecies justice, particularly in relation to her two greatest loves, dingoes and flying foxes. One of Rose's last papers was called 'Shimmer: When All You Love is Being Trashed', a passionate love letter to flying foxes, and she just managed to finish a book expanding upon these ideas before dying of cancer at the end of 2018. After three years of waiting for the posthumous release of *Shimmer: Flying Fox Exuberance in Worlds of Peril*, I find myself reading a PDF of the publishing proofs, feeling a range of emotions: joy that Rose is able to communicate her open-hearted delight in these delightful beings; disgust at the brutalities they endure; sympathetic pain for their plight; and sadness for the unravelling lifeways that Rose alerts us to, compounded by the loss of this 'remarkable and ethical thinker' as Tony Birch put it.

Shimmer revisits many of Rose's beloved concepts and theorists, including stalwarts of multispecies ethnography, ecofeminism and environmental humanities such as Anna Tsing, Val Plumwood, and Donna Haraway. Her colleague Thom Van Dooren writes in an obituary for Rose that she also possesses a special affinity with philosophers and writers of the Shoah, in spite,

or perhaps because of her liberal Christian upbringing. Her father was a Christian minister, and agnostic theology is evident throughout *Shimmer*, which weaves together life-affirming philosophies from various traditions. Rose invokes Emmanuel Levinas's idea that 'ethics precedes ontology', and that 'before we take our first breath we are already indebted' (5). The generosity of this worldview is all the more remarkable for emerging from a Nazi POW camp (Levinas was spared concentration camps because he was a French soldier, but as a Jew suffered particularly draconian treatment). In *Wild Dog Dreaming: Love and Extinction* (2011), Rose chastises Levinas for limiting his responsibility to the *human* other, an ethics he based on an encounter with the (human) face. Here, she takes matters into her own hands, declaring a face could just as easily be 'a leathery wing and a gently rasping little tongue, or it might be a million-strong sortie across the evening sky' (65). Multispecies ethics requires that we use our imaginations to recognise our connections.

Rose always brings broader cosmological discussions back to the specificity of flying foxes because they take us 'straight to the heart of every big question facing Earth life in the twenty-first century' (3). These animals have a 40-million-year history on this continent, but continual habitat destruction forces them towards towns and cities where they are persecuted. Added to this, rising temperatures have led to mass deaths for flying foxes, whose organs start to fail at 43 degrees Celsius. They need our help, and with this book, Rose is responding to that call with passion and enthusiasm. She connects flying foxes and their myrtaceous mutualisms (co-evolution with flowering eucalypts), to First Nations' kinship with bats through dreaming stories, to wildlife carers who nurture sick, injured, and orphaned bats until they are well enough to re-join their communities. For Rose, to love flying foxes is to love life's bounty and diversity, and even as she reports on the multiple violences they suffer, she also attends to their beauty: 'their high-flying verve, their joyful labour awash in pollen and nectar, their travels and attachments to home place, and their intensely social lives' (11).

Rose outlines the differences between microbats and megabats, and distinguishes between the four species of pteropids, or flying foxes, in Australia. She discusses their physiology, behaviour, sociality, and, following Yarralin epistemologies, their *culture* (75). As they eat, flying foxes simultaneously feed Country, creating future forests with their droppings,

and pollinating flowers with their long, curious tongues. We also learn of the pressures upon flying foxes, including brutal council and government sanctioned ‘dispersals’, and heat stress events, which bat advocate Tim Pearson describes as a mass of stricken animals clumping and sliding down trees, creating ‘a melted candle of dead bats... It’s horrible, it really is’ (38).

Such horrors cry out for intervention, and Rose presents us with a ‘thick vision’ of care (55), including on-the-ground reportage of bat rescuers, what they bear witness to, and how they interact with their charges. Rose never shies away from acknowledging love as a guiding force, at least on the human side, while, on the flying fox side, she says ‘we cannot know if love is an appropriate word, but their passionate commitment is amply evident and deeply moving’ (66). She is convinced flying fox mothers are ‘in love’ with their babies as they gaze into each other’s eyes, while flying foxes and carers also share ‘an intersubjective cross-species gaze’ (66-67). One carer declares that flying foxes ‘give themselves to you... They empty their souls into you’ (67). Meanwhile, volunteers work ‘their guts out’ (46). There is a permeability and a fluidity in these interspecies connections, an openness to each other.

Living with Yarralin people gave Rose a tool kit for participation in life’s web. Initially, she joined her hosts in eating flying foxes (74), until she was claimed as a sister by a senior woman; a flying fox matriarch (82). Now that Rose was flying fox kin, she could no longer eat them. Moreover, she was affected by this change beyond alimentary regulations, and began to experience and enact an ethics for life in a multispecies world (83). It was with Yarralin people that Rose also learned about the ‘shimmer’ of life, particularly when dancing ceremony throughout the night, until song became ‘iridescent’ with ‘interweaving patterns’ (85). Rose’s concept of shimmer extends an interpretation of Yolngu aesthetics by anthropologist Howard Morphy, where the Yolngu term *bir’yun* is applied to brilliant or shimmering paintings, but also relates to other natural phenomena such as sun glinting on water. Rose takes shimmer to connote the pulse of life across the biosphere: ‘seasons, new births, new growth, sap moving, lightning striking, the winds’ action rippling the water... There is nothing that does not participate in the flow of power’ (144). She imagines shimmer as a bat that ‘spreads its wings and calls out: Yes!’, enlarging the seemingly simple three letter affirmation to encompass all desire and passion for life on Earth (17).

Becoming part of the shimmering pattern of life is to ‘join in the call’ (86). There is a back and forth, an oscillation, or flip, between call and response, which radiates out, from ceremony, to Country, and beyond. While Rose doesn’t mention echolocation, because it applies to microbats rather than flying foxes, I think it is a generative image to add to those she invokes in the name of shimmer. Echolocation is the perfect manifestation of Levinas’s ethics preceding ontology: an echolocating bat’s being is entirely co-constituted with habitus; there is a shimmering relationality between figure and field. Echolocation calls to Country, and Rose posits everything as communication: trees call to flying foxes via their nectar, and in Yarralin cosmologies, it is flying foxes who call for rain. Such calls demand a response: flying foxes pollinate the trees; the Rainbow Snake brings rain (96-97). And so too, humans respond to the call of a species in distress.

Part of the pteropid’s great Yes! to life is their nomadic (as opposed to migratory) lifestyles. As an ‘earthbound mammal’, Rose imagines ‘how thrilling it must be to race over the country in fine flight’ (99). She recounts stories of bats who have been tracked making 2000km round trips up and down the East Coast, speculating that such travel would ‘enhance an individual’s personal reputation’, and possibly their desirability, ‘as someone who has a lot to communicate’ (101). Flying fox stories might include ‘tales of paradise, where blossoms are bowed down with lashings of nectar... tales of the best sex ever or of partying all night’. Inevitably, though, there will be ‘stories of skyscrapers, brick walls and all manner of strange encounters’ (114). On a windy night in Melbourne after reading this, all I could think of was little bodies being smashed into buildings. Later, I heard from flying fox carers that hundreds of bats met their deaths that night across the state of Victoria.

Rose invokes extinction as a vortex sucking everything into its wake – a world in which renewal can no longer keep pace with death. She examines specific cases in detail: the tick-tobacco-flying-fox nexus (160), in which an introduced weed changes the feeding habits of spectacled flying foxes, exposing them to ticks they have no immunity to. They become paralysed and die; their babies die of starvation. She devotes time to the (now historical) connection between lychee farming and electrical grids, and other cruel methods of crop protection, such as shooting. Crop damage correlates with the loss of native foods from

deforestation (168); flying foxes are then punished for their hunger. This is flying fox genocide, a ‘pteropucidal black hole’ (169), where sources of food for starving animals are also death traps. Farmers continue to approach the flying fox ‘problem’ in the mode of biologist Francis Ratcliffe, who in the 1930s wrote a guide to the most effective methods of flying fox extermination (183). At the time, the idea of completely extinguishing a native species was considered normal, and thanks to such attitudes, a recent study estimates the grey-headed flying fox will be extinct in around 80 years. After generations of culling, the depleted remaining populations will struggle to overcome (anthropogenic) heat waves and (anthropogenic) starvation (162). This reminds me of Shannon Woodcock’s ‘Intimacy. Extinction. 2000 Dead Bats’, in which the author is involved in a traumatic attempt at flying fox rescue during a heat-stress event. Woodcock squarely lays the blame upon white colonists for creating this situation, and doesn’t shirk her responsibility within this legacy.

Dispersals exacerbate flying foxes’ heat intolerance, as they are naturally attracted to cooler areas, and being forced to decamp puts them at risk. An example is the Melbourne Botanical Gardens, where the resident grey-head colony never experienced heat stress events. Since being expelled to the Yarra Bend Park, they have experienced numerous die-offs during heat waves (167). Similar dispersal tactics were undertaken in the Sydney Botanical Gardens, much to Rose’s horror. She writes, mocking the Judeo-Christian domination of nature that still plays out today: ‘There was a garden; there were trees, of course, and there were creatures. There were rules; some things were not permitted. But the rules weren’t obeyed. There would have to be an expulsion. It is an ancient story, and a foundational story for narratives of origin in the western world’ (193). Flying fox removals include attacks with smoke, water cannons, firecrackers, helicopters, paintball guns and noise harassment ‘otherwise known as sonic torture’ (198-201). These kinds of tactics break bones and perforate wings, so the animals struggle to fly away. Flying fox carer Louise Saunders narrates the story of a small-town dispersal which included a woman and her young daughter using a leaf blower on a baby bat, as if dealing with endangered native mammals was akin to sweeping away a pile of leaves (203).

Rose is incredulous that such cruelty is not only illogical – flying fox dispersal far more costly than investing in education and peaceful management programs – but that it indicates a

‘total absence of awe’. Rose cannot fathom this seeming immunity to pteropid charms since, when gazing on a ‘blizzard of flying-foxes’, she feels ‘close to paradise’ (209-10). The power of Rose’s thought and prose comes from the way she braids ethics with beauty: hers is an ethico-aesthetic paradigm, to use Félix Guattari’s term. Aesthetics, as with *bir’yun*, spans nature and culture, if those are even distinct categories, and beauty is also sensuous and maybe even sexy. Some passages positively ooze with juicy, lusty, life-full imagery, for example, eucalypts are figured as dazzlingly seductive, with every twig wanting more, ‘more buds, more flowers, more colour, more scent, more pollen, more nectar’ (228). Rose’s world of nectar lapping tongues and wide-open blossoms is palpably erotic.

Desire for life and love is part of the pulse of shimmer, yet death is also part of this pulse which oscillates between natality and mortality: ‘Death only exists because of life, and so to keep faith with life is to keep faith with the relationships between death and life’ (129). Rose’s final blogpost, now no longer accessible, contained a deeply affecting farewell: after so much time writing about ‘ancestral waves of power’, she was now about to join them. For Rose, ancestral power means ‘40 million years of co-evolved mutualisms’ that persist ‘year after year’ (127). There are ‘flying-fox ancestors, tree ancestors, soil ancestors’, a multiplicity of forces from which life emerges (128). This is what Rose writes about as she is dying, and I am reminded of Derek Jarman’s *Chroma*, his love letter to colour and to life written urgently as he was going blind and dying of AIDS-related complications. Rose writes, ‘I have written from and towards my love of the beauty of life, and in the end I hand the work over to readers in the hope that they will continue to expand the ripples of connection’ (18). What a gift, and what a responsibility.

Works Cited

- Birch, Tony. 'On Thinking'. *Overland*, no. 234, 2019. <https://overland.org.au/previous-issues/issue-234/column-on-thinking/>
- Jarman, Derek. *Chroma: A Book of Colour*. Century, 1994.
- Rose, Deborah Bird. *Wild Dog Dreaming: Love and Extinction*. University of Virginia Press, 2011.
- . 'Shimmer: When All You Love is Being Trashed'. *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, edited by Anna Tsing, et al., University of Minnesota Press, 2017.
- van Dooren, Thom. 'Deborah Bird Rose (1946–2018).' *American Anthropologist*, vol. 122, 2020, pp. 192-195.
- Woodcock, Shannon. 'Intimacy. Extinction. 2000 Dead Bats.' *Overland*, May 2019. <https://overland.org.au/2019/05/intimacy-extinction-2000-dead-bats/>