

Ingratitude in Gratitude to Deborah Bird Rose

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This is a story of how Debbie Rose grounded my research in unlikely ways and how I repaid her by writing something critically provocative about the field she helped found: the environmental humanities. I don't feel bad about this, which is odd given my learned tendency towards feelings of guilt. But as a strange kind of free verse elegy I want to explore the ambivalent state I find myself in here: on one hand grieving a lost mentor and friend, and on the other feeling committed to my critical position.

Can a critical expression ever be a sign of gratitude?

What does it mean to inherit something complicated in a complicated way?

Although her reputation preceded her and we'd met briefly years earlier, it wasn't until I submitted my PhD that I really met Debbie for the first time. I had written about *King Lear* in a literary studies program and found myself one day rabbiting on to the interesting and interdisciplinary crew in the newly established environmental humanities program at UNSW about the crown of weeds in *King Lear*. A few strange things happened and I was crowned with weeds by Debbie after I submitted my PhD. Writing in a now-abandoned blog I said this: 'I am incredibly honoured to have been crowned with weeds by Professor Bird Rose and I can only hope to live up to the ideals represented by this digestible and perishable diadem.'

Debbie was a mentor and friend, before a professional interlocutor. She crowned me with weeds, she came and blessed Earlwood Farm when we moved in, she presided over my marriage ceremony, and became someone with whom I discussed mortality and life due to a concomitant cancer diagnosis. She loaned me her car so I could drop my child to pre-school while I recovered from cancer surgery. Her groundbreaking professional work in anthropology and extinction studies was, for me, secondary to our friendship and the associated *ad hoc* mentoring I was fortunate enough to receive.

In this context—which perhaps contains the complexity of any context—what does it mean to respect the dead?

How do we remember those who are no longer walking amongst us and who do not have the right of reply?

How do we show respect and gratitude?

In some traditions one cannot refer to dead people by name or image. In others, an uncritical reverence, carried by image and first name, is obligatory. Captain James Cook is one of those names that falls into the latter category which, in certain contexts, demands unequivocal reverence. In some traditions, even the most fraught figures suddenly become heroes, while the best are forgotten.

King Lear was the subject of the PhD I was forging ahead with when I met Debbie. The play dramatises the problems with uncritical legacies. What happens is this: approaching his own death, the titular character divests himself of rule (basically doing the one thing a king is *not allowed* to do). He then sets up a love test to determine who shall inherit the kingdom: the biggest piece awarded to those who display the most overt gratitude and love. The two daughters who submit to the rules of the test end up with a sizeable chunk of land, but a third refuses to play the game and is banished from the kingdom. The play, when viewed from this point of view, represents what happens when a living person tries to control the terms of their posthumous legacy. It also at the same time reveals the problems with uncritical legacies. If we are to speak of the dead and refer to them by name, and this is something we do as white settler peoples, then perhaps we need to do so in a way that reflects and respects the complexity of their life.

The last thing I have in print that engages Debbie's work, and one of the only things I have in print that engages Debbie's work, is deeply critical rather than reverent. It feels disrespectful, because my culture (as ashamed as I feel claiming it as 'mine') asks me to build celebratory monuments. I take the opportunity of this memorial to mount a defence of my position on Debbie's scholarship as a form of gratitude and respect, and to show how (in resistance of a culture that invests millions in statues of Captain Cook) careful critique can be a form of gratitude and respect.

In an essay co-authored by Astrida Neimanis and myself called 'Composting Feminisms and Environmental Humanities' we 'pick on' Debbie twice for *failing* to do something. In this instance it was for failing to fully acknowledge the feminist work on naturecultures that is so foundational to environmental humanities work. In our paper we explore some of the origin stories of environmental humanities and examine their engagements, or not, with certain traditions of feminist thought. It is a provocation. Debbie evidently worked tirelessly to critique the nature culture split but within a different intellectual tradition—anthropology.

When I heard Debbie was actively dying I seriously reflected: is this the last thing I want to publicly say about this extraordinary, transformative woman in the journal she co-founded and in her lifetime? Debbie was more a friend than a colleague and interlocutor. Is this

how we treat our friends? She, as I learned at the celebration of her life, was ubiquitously generous and I was lucky enough to be swept up in her wake. I was ultimately and subtly mentored by her in the early days of environmental humanities in Australia, and I go on to make some nit-picky point about the politics of citation?

What is the definition of ingratitude again?

Debbie Rose's work *The Saga of Captain Cook* (1985) is methodologically radical and groundbreaking for the way it prints the words of her Indigenous collaborator verbatim, for how she repositioned the place of the researcher. How she sought to learn *from* and generate knowledge *with* her collaborators, rather than know *about* them was a critical intervention in a discipline with a history of racist exploitation. She recognised something really key about all research, but something that is not always made obvious. Something that now seems so obvious: that the anthropologist—any researcher—does not research, think and write from a neutral position. That both their methods and their method of research dissemination has an immanent politics. Always. That is both those that appear neutral and those that seem obviously political, polemical or provocative. Scholars agree that Debbie's seemingly subtle methodological shift was a key part of a huge transformative reckoning within her discipline. This transformation is still in process, the reckoning remains incomplete.

The same methodological innovation is required today in the broad fields of environmental humanities, but what is that move? What knowledge needs to be framed differently to do different institutional work? I think that what I am working with in a range of ways is this question: how to bring the politics of such a move into this space. I work with different (if related) knowledges to Debbie. And I seek to respect the radicalism immanent in her work, whilst simultaneously acknowledging that the lines of research politics have been redrawn in the interim.

Debbie wrote of the gift as 'infinite and outside of systems of exchange and reciprocity' as something that can 'never be repaid.' It is my view that an obligatory performance of gratitude seeks to energetically and emotionally repay what was given. If that is true, though, what does voluntary gratitude look like? Is it not necessarily complex and lined with a range of good and bad impulses and emotions: a sense of unpayable debt, a desire to live up to the gift given and, possibly, a kernel of discontent about the responsibility of one's inheritance? Gratitude for me, as I feel its warmth and obligation in my bones, is always possibly ingratitude. Just as Debbie calls us to situate the gift within ecological flow, which includes the 'precarious partnership between life and death', my responsibility to her legacy—as both a scholar and friend—remains dangerously perched on the edge.

WORKS CITED

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