

Reflections on Environmental History and the Work of Deborah Bird Rose

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I have been engaging with Deborah Bird Rose’s work in a project that aims to bring together environmental history and the broader environmental humanities to examine the past and possible futures of wetlands in the Murray-Darling Basin, Australia. I have particularly been engaging with two concepts she developed in conversation with others: ‘will-to-destruction’ and ‘deep colonising’ (‘Angel’ 67-78; ‘Land’ 6-13). These concepts are connected through histories of British colonisation and are relevant to environmental historians more widely, in Australia and other places.

In her article, ‘What if the Angel of History were a Dog?’, Rose explains that a ‘will-to-destruction’:

is not universal; it seems to be associated primarily with hierarchical societies and state formations. The process requires imagining total destruction, that is, imagining a future emptiness, and then working systematically to accomplish that emptiness. (68)

In this article, Rose is writing specifically about the mass killing of dingoes through baiting by pastoralists in the Northern Territory to protect their cattle farms, something she witnessed in 1980. The baiting had cascading consequences, as it rendered the dingo carcasses deadly to most scavengers who ate them. Rose argued that singular notions of progress underpinned this kind of ‘will-to-destruction’, which included not only consequences for humans but nonhumans. In my work on wetlands, I have come across this sort of ‘will-to-destruction’ from the mid-nineteenth century to today, and have specifically engaged with it in relation to ‘pest’ species; for example, rice farmers have sought to eradicate ducks who were attracted to the water on their farms from the 1920s, and pelicans on the Coorong were massacred in the early twentieth century, with killing encouraged by a government bounty.

Recently, I have been discussing weaving and water politics with Aboriginal women in different places in the Murray-Darling Basin. Historically, Aboriginal women’s knowledge and spirituality have been overlooked and overridden within government institutions, including those related to land rights. Part of this has been due to a lack of recognition of the gendered nature of Aboriginal people’s knowledges and the effects of male dominated bureaucracies on women sharing their knowledges. In elucidating these issues, Rose developed the notion of deep colonising, an idea she formulated within the context of a

number of women anthropologists speaking out about the issues being faced by Aboriginal women. This included feminist anthropologist Diane Bell, who was a consultant on the Hindmarsh Island bridge case, which centred on Ngarrindjeri Country near the mouth of the Murray River, in the 1990s. It is essential that women's stories be heard but also that we work against, as Rose wrote, 'the colonising demand for information' ('Land' 6). This concept has been particularly helpful in understanding women's weaving, as much more than a simple making of objects but as a deeply dynamic and politically engaged practice that is part of being on and caring for Country.

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