

The Edges

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My personal introduction to Debbie was through learning about writing: twenty years ago she stood in front of a diverse group of postgrads and read from work in progress. She lyrically described driving across the Alligator River Flood Plain in Kakadu National Park in the late afternoon with an Aboriginal man, who says a version of ‘Hey Debbie, if you look out the window to the east you’ll see a cool thing’. She looks out the window of the Toyota, and the dark edge of Burrungkuy – the Nourlangie Rock escarpment – is lit up with tiny glittering sparkles of light. The man laughingly explains that it is tourists’ camera flashes, as they photograph the sunset from one of the most famous Indigenous rock art galleries in the world.

In the first paragraph of *Wild Dog Dreaming*, Debbie describes her encounter with what is known in the bush as a ‘dog tree’: a tree with the strung-up bodies of dead dingoes hanging from it, on the edge of a national park. Before I read *Wild Dog Dreaming* I had been to that dog tree, and immediately recognized the description.

The dog tree story captures many divergent issues and concepts in one simultaneously appalling and pedestrian image. The Alligator River Flood Plain story highlights inversions, alterities and disruptions – very different ways of viewing one event.

Debbie wrote herself into her work, and she wrote using language that is complex, specific and lyrical. Both of those things were and are lessons to me: that this work is complex and personal, and how you write it can be lyrical, beautiful and emotional. In what she wrote, another major lesson for me is about the search to find the place and meaning of death. Several of Debbie’s works discuss bringing death into dialogue with life. Barry Lopez, another writer whom I hugely respect talks of ‘the conversation of death’ (62), which is about death providing opportunities for life for others.

Following this, Debbie relates an Aboriginal perspective on human exceptionalism, which is defined as a *lack* of capacity rather than an excess of capacity. Humans *are* different, but it is because the other beings are *more*, we have lost or never had their capacities. Soren Larsen and Jay Johnson speak of humans as the ‘junior sibling’ in genealogical relationship with the planet, part of something far greater we imperfectly understand (200). Seriously engaging with this position of junior sibling, this position of lack and all that it entails, requires humility and vulnerability. The ‘emergency conditions’ in which we live

provide perfect conditions to ponder both our vulnerability and also actually our, and others, deaths.

Debbie wrote of the war against dingoes (and many other species). Canids, the dog family including dingoes, are actually the most widespread and successful predator on the planet. So while there is a global story of decline and violence, there is another story of thriving. Some time ago, not far from that dog tree, I was watched by a dingo. I have many times been watched by foxes, and once by wolves. Locking your gaze with those animals is a transforming experience, an engagement at the edges of each of our lifeworlds.

Debbie wrote:

If you choose to work at the edges your strength rests with people who are also at the edge. If you are working on the edge you know that is the most interesting place to be. Cherishing the people with whom you share this cutting-edge zone is a very important way of affirming your commitment to certain kinds of disruptive and enabling knowledge. (70)

Many of us, both readers and people who knew her personally, have been cherished by Debbie, but the bigger message, one way we can keep on acknowledging Debbie's work, is that we need to continue that cherishing, disruptive, enabling work amongst ourselves and with others, both human and non-human, we can seek out on those edges.

CITED WORKS

- Larsen, Soren and Jay Johnson. *Being Together in Place: Indigenous Coexistence in a More Than Human World*. U of Minnesota P, 2017.
- Lopez, Barry. *Of Wolves and Men*. Scribner, 2004.
- Rose, Deborah Bird. 'Writing Place.' *Writing Histories: Imagination and Narrative*. Edited by Ann Curthoys and Ann McGrath, Monash Publications in History, 2000, pp.64-74.
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