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SHIMMER

WHEN ALL YOU LOVE IS BEING TRASHED

Deborah Bird Rose

ANGIOSPERMS FORM THE GREAT FAMILY of flowering plants, and their way of life is to entice. They invite, or lure, others through their dazzling brilliance of color, scent, and shape, and they reward their visitors—birds, mammals, insects—with nutrients. In their desire to attract others whom they need for pollination, they have brought forth a worldwide multispecies potlatch. The bling of life owes much to this exuberant, alluring family. In this chapter, I focus on relationships in Australia between angiosperms and one of their important symbiont partners, flying foxes (of the genus *Pteropus*). I aim to explore a matrix of power, desire, and lures and to move across several species and cultures to draw our attention to the brilliant shimmer of the biosphere and the terrible wreckage of life in this era that we are coming to refer to as the Anthropocene.

I best learned about the shimmer of life from Aboriginal people in the Victoria River region of Australia's Northern Territory, a place to which I have been returning for more than thirty years. I use the concept of shimmer to frame this chapter because I believe it is susceptible to a "reciprocal capture" with Western thought.¹ For philosopher Isabelle Stengers, "reciprocal capture" is "an event, the production of new, immanent modes of existence" in which neither entity transcends the other or forces the other to bow down.² It is a process of encounter and transformation, not absorption, in which different ways of being and doing find interesting things to do together.

Stengers proposes that possibilities for new modes of existence emerge in acts of reciprocal capture, and it is my hope that an encounter with shimmer may help us better to notice and care for those around us who are in peril. Here, at the edge of extinction, is the place to begin, when the worlds that one loves—including angiosperms and flying foxes—are being trashed.

The extinction crisis is very real. Rates of extinction are perhaps ten thousand times the background rate; as ecologist Steven Harding says, we are hemorrhaging species.³ When scientists offer us numbers, they are talking about a kind of measurement of verifiable presence or, in a sense, presumptive absence. Such numbers are a proxy to which it is worth paying attention. However, what is actually occurring is more dire than the numbers indicate. There are the functional extinctions, the extinction cascades, the extinction vortexes; these are ways in which, as things start to slip down that death road, other things start going too. Relationships unravel, mutualities falter, dependence becomes a peril rather than a blessing, and whole worlds of knowledge and practice diminish. We are looking at worlds of loss that are much greater than the species extinction numbers suggest. As I will show shortly, shimmer, the ancestral power of life, arises in relationship and encounter, so extinction cascades drag shimmer from the world. The loss is both devastating and barely comprehensible.

Extinction cascades involve failing connectivities. Of the many stories one might tell about multispecies connectivities, the starting point for me is in Aboriginal Australia, where I have been learning about multispecies kinship and connectivity for many years. The stories might be said to begin “in the beginning” with the Dreamings, also known as the creation ancestors. The Dreamings are the creators of much of the biotic life of earth. They are shape-shifters and are the founders of kin groups. Those kin groups include the human and the nonhuman descendants of the ancestors. In the area where I have decades of research experience, flying fox (*P. alecto*) Dreamings are the founding ancestors of many people. Equally, the everyday creatures are major pollinators of many trees in the region. Life flows from ancestors into the present and on into the future, and from the outset it is a multispecies interactive project involving (minimally) flying foxes, angiosperms, and human beings.

I have been adopted into a group of flying fox people, and for me this has been an astonishingly powerful lure, calling me to consider

how I might live an ethic of kinship and care within this multispecies family. With it comes a burden: the commitment to bear witness to the shimmering, lively, powerful, interactive worlds that ride the waves of ancestral power. This commitment calls me to engage in forms of scholarship that encourage “passionate immersion” in the lives of both humans and nonhumans.⁴

Brilliance of Motion and Encounter

Shimmer is an Aboriginal aesthetic that helps call us into these multispecies worlds. I use the term “aesthetic” in a nontechnical way to discuss things that appeal to the senses, things that evoke or capture feelings and responses. I want to think of aesthetics, in part, in angiosperm terms, that is, in terms of lures that both entice one’s attention and offer rewards.

In his classic essay titled “From Dull to Brilliant,” anthropologist Howard Morphy discusses art in the Arnhem Land region of North Australia.⁵ His focus is on the Yolngu term *bir’yun*, which translates as “brilliant” or “shimmering.” This is an aesthetic that is found in many parts of Australia and is not limited to art. It pervades ritual, dance, and many aspects of life more widely. Morphy’s analysis is one of the best for getting at the multispecies processes that concern me. As Morphy describes brilliance (or shimmer—both terms are good), the process of Yolngu painting starts off with a rough blocking out of shapes and then shifts to fine-grain crosshatching. When a painting has just its rough shape, the artists describe it as “dull.” The crosshatching shifts the painting to “brilliant,” and it is the brilliance of finely detailed work that captures the eye. *Bir’yun* is the shimmer, the brilliance, and, the artists say, it is a kind of motion. Brilliance actually grabs you. Brilliance allows you, or brings you, into the experience of being part of a vibrant and vibrating world. When a painting reaches brilliance, for example, people say that it captures the eye much in the way that the eye is captured by sun glinting on water. It is a capture that is all over the place: water capturing and reflecting the sun, the sun glinting on the water, the eyes of the beholders captured and enraptured, the ephemeral dance of it all. It is equally a lure: creatures long to be grabbed, to experience that beauty, that surprise, that gleaming ephemeral moment of capture.

Bir’yun, or shimmer, or brilliance, is—people say—one’s actual

capacity to see and experience ancestral power. This is to say that when one is captured by shimmer, one experiences not only the joy of the visual capture but also, and more elegantly as one becomes more knowledgeable, ancestral power as it moves actively across the world.

I learned about *bir'yun* through dancing all night. In contrast to Morphy, I did not work with people who were visual artists; rather, I encountered people who focused on performance, who connected bodies and earth through dance and song.⁶ In music, there are multiple different temporal patterns, and it is through those temporal patterns that one starts to experience shimmer. Ethnomusicologists describe these experiences as iridescence.⁷ The temporal patterns are a kind of foregrounding and backgrounding, flipping back and forth to the point where the music and the dance become iridescent (or shimmer) with ancestral power.

As the example of brilliance in sun on water indicates, *bir'yun* exceeds human action. "From Dull to Brilliant" can be read as an account of ecology: the earth shimmers. The ecological patterns are manifold, and for the sake of encountering just one example, we might think about pulse. Recall that within the domain of art, a pulse is performed first by bringing the painting from dull to brilliant. Then, at the end of a ritual, the brilliant paintings are rubbed out; they are made dull again. A similar process takes place with dance: first the singing and dancing, which generate iridescence, then the songs and motions that close it down again. At an ecological scale in northern Australia, one of the most obvious patterns is the pulse between wet and dry seasons. The desiccation of the dry season dulls the landscape in many ways (although the country is always beautiful): there is a winding back of fertility, a loss of water, and thus loss of the possibility for sun to glint on water. But then, things begin to move toward brilliant again: the lightning starts to spark things up, the rains start to bring forth shiny green shoots, and rainbows offer their own kind of brilliance. Shimmer comes with the new growth, the everything-coming-new process of shininess and health, and the new generations.⁸

This is the same motion as that of the paintings—from dull to brilliant, and then back to dull, and then back to brilliant. Ecological pulses come from and enable the experience of ancestral power. Indeed, for power to come forth, it must recede. For shimmer to capture the eye, there must be absence of shimmer. To understand how

absence brings forth, it must be understood not as lack but as potential. This is where one grasps, afresh, the awful disaster of extinction cascades: not only life and life's shimmer but many of its manifold potentials are eroding.

Human Exceptionalism

Western legacies of mechanism are not a good way to appreciate either dull or brilliant.⁹ The term *bir'yun*—which does not distinguish between domains of nature and culture—is characteristic of a lively pulsating world, not a mechanistic one. *Bir'yun* shows us that the world is not composed of gears and cogs but of multifaceted, multi-species relations and pulses. To act as if the world beyond humans is composed of "things" for human use is a catastrophic assault on the diversity, complexity, abundance, and beauty of life.

The legacies of Western mechanism have manifested through repeated assertions of human exceptionalism—that man is the only animal to make tools; that man is the only animal with language, a sense of fairness, generosity, laughter; that man is the only mindful creature. On one hand, all of these claims to exceptionalism have been thoroughly undermined. Other beings also do wonderful and clever things; we are not a unique outlier but rather are part of various continua. On the other hand, however, the term *Anthropocene* reminds us that it is not yet time to jettison a sense of human exceptionalism. Instead, by foregrounding the exceptional *damage* that humans are causing, the Anthropocene shows us the need for radically reworked forms of attention to what marks the human species as different.

One of the great tasks and opportunities for our moment and for the environmental humanities is "to stay with the *human* trouble," to use and tweak Donna Haraway's term.¹⁰ Let us make another recursion across the terrain of our species, this time trying to tell more truthful accounts than those that stress our wondrous superiority. In an ecologically attentive recursion, we find that man is the only animal to voraciously, relentlessly, and viciously wreck the lifeworld of earth. Man is the only animal systematically to torture members of its own species, as well as members of countless other species, and to engage in seemingly endless and often wildly indiscriminate killing. Precisely because human cruelty tends to drop out of our conversations, I want to insist that we linger with it. It is terrible stuff to

have to stay with for too long, but those who suffer, whether human or more-than-human, don't have a choice. They have to stay with it, because they are experiencing it. At the very least, we who have not yet been drawn into the vortex of violence are called to recognize it, name it, and resist it; we are called to bear witness and to offer care.

A recent example of violence comes from an event in the northern Australian town of Charters Towers in December 2013. A group of residents had complained for some time about a maternity camp of flying foxes in a municipal park. In their view, the creatures were “pests.” And so they organized and conducted an assault. It happened with local government approval; in no way was it a dirty little secret.¹¹ The assault showed us (yet again) that man is the only animal that attacks defenseless creatures with smoke, water cannons, and firecrackers; that uses helicopters to fly low so as to terrify flying foxes and create downdrafts that break their wing bones. Man is the only animal that shoots other creatures with paintball guns, and when the creatures flap around in terror or fall to the ground injured and in shock, man is the only animal that cheers.

This portrait of human cruelty is as one-sided as were earlier accounts of our wondrous superiority. But when we highlight the pitiless and destructive qualities of humans, we see the desperate need to find ways to recuperate relational and mutually beneficial sides of the story about who we are and of what we are capable.

Ability to Care

One of the most interesting things about humans is our remarkable plasticity as individuals and as a species. While cruelty is indeed one of the great insignia of a distinctly human way, there are other sides of our capacity that help us bring ourselves into fellowship with others. In our multispecies ethnographic research at the edge of extinction, my colleague Thom Van Dooren and I have been working with volunteers, scientists, and other people who are doing reparative and protective work with creatures whose species-futures are in peril.

Flying fox carers are one set of passionate people who work at the edge of extinction and who have opened their lives and homes to others. Although there is no way to know exactly how many of these winged creatures dwelled in Australia prior to British settlement, it is certain that their populations have been radically reduced. Today, two



Figure G3.1. Flying fox “bellydipping.” Photograph by Nick Edards/Half Light Photographic, 2009.

mainland species of flying foxes are listed as vulnerable to extinction under the Commonwealth Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act of 1999.¹² Caring for flying foxes can take the form of habitat protection and many other forms of activism and include developing arts and ethics of multispecies conviviality.¹³ The most intimate modes of care involve orphans; the foster babies must be made to feel part of a family. They have to be fed and touched regularly. Human intentionality infuses care practice; youngsters will die without tactile, vocal, sociofamilial care.

When childhood is over, flying foxes don't want parents anymore, so care involves preparing them for adult forms of sociality. They go into a soft release program where they learn to interact with other flying foxes and to fly and navigate. Finally, they return to the bush. And what happens then? Some will be lucky and some won't. Many will be

injured by anthropogenic hazards and end up back in care. So care is an ethical response involving tenderness, generosity, and compassion, and care is an ongoing assumption of responsibility in the face of continuing violence and peril. Pulses of harm and care offer a peculiarly telling story of the Anthropocene, highlighting multispecies entanglements, conflicting ways of being human, mass death, and, through it all, as I discuss later, a great and joyful desire for life.

This recursion across the terrain of our species acknowledges both human violence and the care that seeks to mitigate the effects of violence. Implicitly, it acknowledges the multispecies utility of modern human inventiveness in the form of antibiotics, infant formula, and bottles, for example. At its heart we see beautiful modes of careful attention, and we see them as relational responses that are lured out of us through encounters with others and that enable us to participate in the shimmer of life.

A Love Story

Care is part of a wider story of desire that takes me back to angiosperms and life's shimmer. Flowers and flying foxes come together every year with beautiful timing and exquisite generosity, giving each other great kisses that bring forth new generations. On one side of this kiss is a cohort of Australian trees—Eucalypts, Corymbias, and other members of the Myrtaceae family. The trees put out bright, showy, perfumed flowers because they need to be pollinated, and in fact, many of them need outcrossed pollination. They do best when their pollen is taken from tree to tree over some distance. On the other side, flying foxes are highly attuned to smell, have excellent night vision that is especially attentive to light colors, and have foraging patterns that keep them moving from tree to tree across wide areas. They often travel fifty kilometers per night, and many travel more than a thousand kilometers per year. Trees produce their most nutritious and abundant pollen and nectar at night, when the flying foxes are abroad. Birds and bees get the sloppy leftovers the next morning.

Figure G3.2. Flying fox in flowers. Photograph by Nick Edards/Half Light Photographic, 2008.



Blossoming takes place sequentially and flying foxes somehow know when trees start to bloom hundreds of kilometers away from where they are, and off they go en masse. Both trees and flying foxes depend on these encounters. The tongue meets the flower and the flower meets the tongue in a kiss of symbiotic mutualism. Trees call out to flying foxes in languages of color and scent, and flying foxes respond with gusto.

One of the great utterances of other species is this beautiful assent to life. We have a good word for it in English. It is the great, expressive, demonstrative “yes.” Let us consider the lush, extravagant beauty, flamboyance, and dazzling seductiveness with which Eucalypts say yes. They burst open sequentially, and when they burst, every branch and twig says, “Yes! More! More buds, more flowers, more color, more scent, more pollen, more nectar!” More and more, and all that can be conjured from within the tree to reach out into the world with this great, vivid, multisensorial call “yes!” And for their part, the flying foxes come racing to respond. Their yes includes their long tongues that are perfectly adapted to sucking up nectar and their delicate whiskers that pick up pollen and distribute over 70 percent of it intact. They carry Eucalypt futures on their furry little faces, and across the patchy and increasingly fragmented landscapes of contemporary Australia, the renewal of woodland and forest life hinges on this specific yes. A new generation of trees is carried on the fur and the tongue and on the wings that beat through the night, bringing the animal to the trees and bearing the trees’ gifts along to other trees. At the same time, a new generation of flying foxes is nurtured into life with lashings of glorious nectar.

Saying Yes

We humans, too, can be saying yes. There is a fantastically large set of contexts within which to say yes, but to stay with the flying foxes, it is clear that to celebrate the lives of flying foxes is to say yes to Eucalypts and thus to say yes to dry sclerophyll woodlands and to rainforests. It is to say yes to photosynthesis and to say yes to oxygen. Why would one not? We breathe in, we breathe out. In this world of connectivity, we live to celebrate another day and to experience life’s shimmer as it comes forth in our lives with all manner of tears, happiness,

grief, commitment, love, exuberance, and celebration. Of course, we humans are part of it. The waves of ancestral power that shimmer and grab are also exactly the relationships that bring us forth and sustain us. The kiss of life is an ancestral blessing, alive, brilliant, and pulsating in the world around us and within us.

At the same time, we may also think about what is refused when we turn away from all this abundance. Instead of the kiss of life, we humans too frequently offer a resounding no, and every no also ripples and reverberates across animals and trees, through photosynthesis and oxygen, even into the breath and into the heartbeat and rhythms of life itself. No invades the shimmer of life, unmaking ancestral power. In this time of extinctions, we are going to be asked again and again to take a stand for life, and this means taking a stand for faith in life’s meaningfulness. We are called to live within faith that there are patterns beyond our known patterns and that, in the midst of all that we do not know, we also gain knowledge. We are called to acknowledge that in the midst of all we cannot choose, we also make choices. And we are called into recognition: of the shimmer of life’s pulses and the great patterns within which the power of life expresses itself. We are therefore called into gratitude for the fact that in the midst of terrible destruction, life finds ways to flourish, and that the shimmer of life does indeed include us.

Through her writing on extinction, ethics, and Aboriginal ecological philosophy, **DEBORAH BIRD ROSE** has been a key figure in enlivening the environmental humanities. Her work, based on long-term research with Aboriginal peoples in Australia, focuses on multi-species communities in this time of climate change. She is professor in the Environmental Humanities Program, University of New South Wales, Sydney, and cofounder of the journal *Environmental Humanities*. Her most recent book is *Wild Dog Dreaming: Love and Extinction*.

Notes

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1. Isabelle Stengers, *Cosmopolitics I*, trans. Robert Bononno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).
2. *Ibid.*, 35.
3. Stephan Harding, "Gaia and Biodiversity," in *Gaia in Turmoil: Climate Change, Biodepletion, and Earth Ethics in an Age of Crisis*, ed. Eileen Crist and H. Bruce Rinker (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2010), 107.
4. Anna Tsing, "Arts of Inclusion, or, How to Love a Mushroom," *Australian Humanities Review* 50 (2011): 19.
5. Howard Morphy, "From Dull to Brilliant: The Aesthetics of Spiritual Power among the Yolngu," *Man*, New Series 24, no. 1 (1989): 21–40.
6. Deborah Bird Rose, "Pattern, Connection, Desire: In Honour of Gregory Bateson," *Australian Humanities Review* 35 (June 2005), <http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-June-2005/rose.html>; Bird Rose, "Dreaming Ecology: Beyond the Between," *Religion and Literature* 40, no. 1 (2008): 109–22.
7. Catherine Ellis, "Time Consciousness of Aboriginal Performers," in *Problems and Solutions: Occasional Essays in Musicology Presented to Alice M. Moyle*, ed. Jamie Kassler and Jill Stubington, 149–85 (Sydney: Hale and Iremonger, 1984).
8. My description here is extremely minimal. The shimmer of ecological pulses arises also in their intersecting and crosscutting ripples, for example, the work of the sun ensures that rain does not take over the earth, and the work of rain ensures that the sun does not take over; their pulse is complementary, and each part arrives as relief from an excess of the other. There are winds, of course, and the play of winds on grasses and on clouds. The effect, if one is attentive, is an iridescence or shimmer sparking up at these larger scales.
9. It might be thought that the disenchantment of earth life brings about a pervasive dullness, so it is important to distinguish between "dull" as a monotone of absence and "dull" as the term is being used in this context, as part of a pulse, a zone of potentiality.
10. Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).
11. An excellent account can be seen on YouTube in the form of a documentary by Noel Castley-Wright investigating the animal cruelty applied

to flying fox colonies: "State of Shame—Queensland's Legislated Animal Cruelty," video, 22:13, April 6, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=owF5D6k_9-U.

12. Australian Government Department of Environment, "Flying-Foxes: Environment Law," <https://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/species/flying-fox-law>.
13. Thom Van Dooren and Deborah Bird Rose, "Storied-Places in a Multi-species City," *Humanimalia* 3, no. 2 (2012): 1–27.