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"That Tree E Listen To You": Bill Neidjie's *Story About Feeling* as Literary Ethnobotany

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Abstract

This essay theorizes the concept of *literary ethnobotany* through a phytocritical, or plant-focused, reading of the work of Kakadu Elder "Big" Bill Neidjie. As a genre, on the one hand, literary ethnobotany comprises poetry, prose, scripts, verse-narratives, and other creative writing forms that engage cultural knowledge of plants as food, medicines, fibres, materials, ornaments, decorations, totems, teachers, agents, and personae. As a critical reading optic, on the other hand, literary ethnobotany illuminates the cultural-botanical dimensions of a text, such as Neidjie's *Story About Feeling*, published in 1989. Transcribed by ethnographer Keith Taylor, Neidjie's verse-narrative comprises eleven thematic chapters on, inter alia, the traditional botanical knowledge of the Gaagudju people whose ancestral country encompasses World Heritage-listed Kakadu National Park in the Northern Territory of Australia.

Story About Feeling represents the potentialities of Aboriginal Australian poetry as a medium for preserving traditional botanical knowledge increasingly under threat in neocolonial Australia. More specifically, Neidjie's work hinges on the possibility of *human-plant communication*—that plant life announces itself, through a variety of means, to kin but also to members

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of other species, including animals and humans. For instance, the chapter "Tree" from *Story About Feeling* discloses a complex view of plants as responsive and expressive agents within Gaagudju cosmology, or Dreaming. Respect for—and dialogue with—the botanical world is integral to Neidjie's poetics of place. My application of a literary-ethnobotanical lens to Neidjie's verse-narrative elucidates the role of intercorporeality, affect, and voice in mediating human-plant communication. Once regarded as esotericism, the idea of plant communication has gained scientific traction of late as essential to the fitness of ecological communities. In an integrative and inclusive manner, literary botany facilitates a rapprochement between Indigenous, poetic, and scientific epistemologies of plants.

Keywords: Aboriginal Australian poetry, Bill Neidjie, Gaagudju, literary ethnobotany, phytocriticism, vegetal affect, human-tree communication

"Yes . . .
I chop it down that big tree.
I play . . . I cut it, yes."
"*You cutted yourself!*
When you get oh, about fifty . . .
you'll feel it . . .
pain on your back
because you cutted it."
from *Story About Feeling* (Neidjie 25)

Introduction

This essay develops a transdisciplinary theory of *literary ethnobotany* through a phytocritical – or plant-focused – reading of the verse-narrative writing of Kakadu Elder "Big" Bill Neidjie (1920–2002), who was the last surviving speaker of the Gaagudju language of Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, Australia. Transcribed by ethnographer Keith Taylor and published in 1989, SLM (Senior Law Man) Neidjie's *Story About Feeling* (1989) comprises eleven thematic chapters on, inter alia, the traditional botanical knowledge of the Gaagudju people whose ancestral lands encompass the World Heritage-listed (and uranium deposit-rich) Kakadu National Park (Wrigley 167). As an oral-poetic text, *Story About Feeling* is a story of *djang*, the primal energy that animates Gaagudju Dreaming and inspirits human-vegetal relations. Within the over-arching narrative framework of *djang*, Neidjie narrates a range of ethnobotanical knowledge forms, such as Gaagudju-language names for plants, the procurement of honey and other bush foods, and long-term care of Country through intimate seasonal awareness of arboreal cycles and transformations—from germination and growth to decay and regeneration. Respect for, and dialogue with, plants are integral to the place-based poetics of *Story About Feeling*. The second chapter "Tree," for instance, discloses a bioculturally-integrated, deep time-inflected outlook on plants as percipient and embodied subjects embedded in Gaagudju cosmology or Dreaming (Neidjie 20–38). As Neidjie writes in the same chapter, "You cut im little bit, you got water coming out. / That's his blood, same as your blood. So e alive" (23).

My analysis foregrounds the premise of *human-plant communication* as vital to understanding the complexities of Neidjie's literary ethnobotany, "That tree e listen to you" (23). As evolutionary biologists Anne Leonard and Jacob Francis argue, plant communication "underlies some of the planet's most ecologically and economically [and I would add culturally] important mutualisms" (143).

Situating trees as agential subjects who communicate, through various means, with their kin as well as with members of other species, including humans, is an historically contentious idea that generatively bridges Western (scientific) and Indigenous (traditional) epistemologies of the vegetal world. No longer marginalized as mere esotericism or so-called "folk" belief, plant communication has been affirmed scientifically, in recent years, as pivotal to the ecological fitness of botanical communities (Gagliano "Inside the Vegetal Mind"; Simard).

Story About Feeling engages the premise of vegetal communication in three specific ways—(1) *intercorporeality* (bodily homologies and somatic congruences); (2) *affect* (sensory entanglements and material practices); and (3) *voice* (sonic registers and vegetal articulations)—each of which constitutes a section of my analysis. The prominent orality of Neidjie's verse-narrative mediates the presence of voice, affect, and intercorporeality in the more-than-human world. Through the text, these three phenomena manifest not only in relation to individual plants but within the heteroglossic, multispecies assemblage of Aboriginal Country. *Story About Feeling* thus constitutes an oral-poetic intervention into the erosion of traditional botanical knowledge in the wake of Australian neocolonialism.

As delineated in what follows, the literary botany of Neidjie facilitates a rapprochement between poetic, scientific, and Indigenous conceptions of botanical life toward an ethics of the non-human. Neidjie's cosmology, accordingly, discloses "a democratic space inhabited by a multiverse of beings, of which humans are just one manifestation" (Black 41). The vibrant intervention performed by *Story About Feeling* and other literary-ethnobotanical narratives becomes especially urgent when viewed in relation to climate change-induced floristic diversity loss in Australia and elsewhere (Hannah 2020). As native plant populations decline, so too does ancestral cultural knowledge of them become imperilled.

Toward Literary Ethnobotany: Biocultural Knowledge of Plants in Poetry

In its integrated literary-ethnobotanical orientation, Neidjie's *Story About Feeling* marks a convergence between traditional cultural knowledge of plants and the verse-narrative itself as an oral-textual hybrid. In contrast to Anglo-European botanical science—and its imperial, colonial, *and* neocolonial underpinnings—the long-standing biocultural assemblages between Aboriginal Australian people and plants counter the ideological impulse of the nation-state

to appropriate flora as denatured materials, objects, and symbols. Indeed, much traditional botanical knowledge is enclosed in stories of plants.

For instance, in the Illawarra region of the South Coast of New South Wales, a young woman named Krubi, wrapped a red kangaroo cloak, awaited the return of her lover, the warrior Bahmai (McLeod 110). After his death in battle, she refuses to eat, withers away, and dies. A crimson flower—its stem as high as a long spear—emerges from the spot where she passed on. Resembling a broken heart, the flower bears petals in the shape of teardrops. Named *waratah*, the brilliant red blossom reminds people of the present generation of the eternal bond between Krubi and Bahmai during an early time in the earth's history (McLeod 12). Among the Dharug of present-day Sydney, moreover, the waratah retains considerable significance. Mourners place the flower alongside the body of a deceased person, and foragers extract nectar from the tubular flowers (Clarke *Aboriginal Plant Collectors* 49). For the Dharawal people of the Sydney basin area, for whom the waratah is known as *moolone* or *mooloone*, the species has been used as a food, drink, decoration, and ceremonial object (Wesson 100). These regionally-embedded, seasonally-nuanced, and culturally-specific imbrications between humans and flora countervail the totalizing logic of scientific imperialism.

In contemporary Aboriginal Australian poetry, vegetal life embodies cultural heritage, inspires community identity, and presents an anti-national reagent (Ryan "'No More Boomerang'"). Predicated on oral traditions and song-poetry—some of which have an approximately sixty-thousand-year-old line of transmission—Aboriginal poetry resonates with allusions to the natural-cultural domain of plants, animals, water, elements, forebears, supernatural deities, and human communities (Berndt; Brandenstein and Thomas). From an Aboriginal perspective, the natural environment is a mutable assemblage of human-non-human beings, including Creation ancestors (Rose). In this respect, Kombumerri-Wakka Wakka philosopher Mary Graham emphasizes that "the sacred web of connections includes not only kinship relations and relations to the land, but also relations to nature and all living things" (187). Hybridizing textuality and orality, Aboriginal poetry communicates biocultural knowledge, voices pressing ecological concerns, and formulates critiques of the neocolonial inequities that threaten to erode traditional ways of life. Aboriginal poetry, at the same time, discloses epistemologies of the botanical world that run counter to the strict Western demarcation between human and non-human—a separation that, arguably, underlies the interlinked imperatives of domination that propel neocolonialisms. The hierarchization of humans, animals, plants, and others life forms reduces the more-than-human domain to an inert substratum—the

mute material from which nations emerge.

One of the interventions performed by Australian Aboriginal poetry is its calling attention to the longstanding interdependencies between individuals, communities, and plants (Clarke *Where the Ancestors Walked* 144-48; Rose 1992). Contrary to the figuration of plants as non-agential icons of statehood or objects of aesthetic gratification, in *Story About Feeling* Neidjie engages in dialogue with the arboreal subject as "e" (or "s/he") whereas, similarly, Noongar activist-poet Jack Davis (1917-2000) in this collection *Black Life* (1992) directs his poems to plants themselves as percipient listeners. The interwoven natural-cultural—or "ethnobotanical"—elements of Aboriginal poetry, however, have not been previously considered by literary critics (for example, Stuart Cooke; John Kinsella; Mudrooroo; Adam Shoemaker; Andrew Taylor). Instead, scholars have approached contemporary Aboriginal verse as protest poetry (Mudrooroo), postcolonial counter-mimicry (Huggan and Tiffin 94-7), the vocalization of unrecoverable cultural losses (Kinsella) or, as in many early appraisals, versified vernacular appropriate for performative activism but deficient in literary value (Taylor). These extant approaches obscure the biocultural possibilities of Aboriginal poetry as a medium for ensuring the continuity of traditional knowledge of plants and other life forms ever more under threat in post- and neocolonial Australia. Prevailing critical models, furthermore, minimize the spatiotemporal contiguousness between traditional song-poetry and Aboriginal poetry (Cooke 2013), particularly with respect to plants and knowledge of them.

As a means of maintaining cultural understandings of flora and resisting colonialism's impulse to subdue native flora, Neidjie's poetry remains significant on an island continent beset by rampant ecological decline, as intensified during the calamitous 2019-2020 bushfire season (Cave). Inhering within Aboriginal ethnobotanical poetics is an abiding respect for vegetal beings as kin, relations, totems, and teachers. In this manner, literary ethnobotany presents a vital means of preserving Indigenous peoples' knowledge of vegetal life while also recognizing the inherent wisdom of plants themselves as subjects in their own right (Ryan "Towards Literary Ethnobotany"). Yet, rather than uncritically endorsing the imperialist origins of ethnobotany—based in the positivist paradigms of anthropology and botany that historically situate plants as "voiceless" research objects—literary ethnobotany, as I conceptualize it here, reflects developments in anti-colonial theory and decolonial praxis by Indigenous scholars such as New Zealander, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, who affiliates with the Ngāti Awa and Ngāti Porou iwi. Tuhiwai Smith acknowledges that the term *research* is indissolubly implicated in Anglo-European imperialism, colonialism, and nationalism. In contrast, decolonial praxis underscores the value of Indigenous perspectives

that uphold "self-determination, decolonisation and social justice" (Tuhiwai Smith 35). The approach proposed in this article aims to ensure that research into Indigenous peoples' traditional botanical knowledge becomes "more respectful, ethical, sympathetic and useful" than has historically been the case in Australia (Tuhiwai Smith 43).

As a dialogical paradigm grounded in an ethics of plants, literary ethnobotany constitutes a basis for more fully and respectfully appreciating the verse-narratives of Neidjie: "This tree e stay . . . watching you. / Something . . . this tree. / If you go by yourself, lie down, / that tree e can listen / Might be e might give you signal" (Neidjie 35). *Story About Feeling* discloses ancestral human-plant traditions, many of which are under threat from Anglo-Australian neocolonial practices of uranium mining, highway construction, and land appropriation. Neidjie's work versifies forms of traditional botanical knowledge that have become gradually more compromised as floristic communities decline and, moreover, as younger generations of Indigenous people take less interest in ancestral relations to plants. In addition to its verse-narrative form, *Story About Feeling* includes images conveying literary ethnobotanical meaning. A series of artworks by Aboriginal artist Jack Bunkaniyal (born 1947) amplifies the text's botanical elements. For instance, the caption of a black-and-white depiction of *mankolk*, or cocky apple (*Planchonia careya*), explains that the species "bears a pulpy and sweet fruit in the late dry season, while only a small shrub and later as a medium sized tree" (reproduced in Neidjie 17). The caption accompanying Bunkaniyal's rendering of *djorrkkundedjmildurngh* ("possum eat tree"), a fig that clings to rock surfaces, explicates that the species is a food source for djorrkkun, the rock ring-tail possum (reproduced in Neidjie 20). This convergence of text and image heightens the vegetal resonances of *Story About Feeling*.

Bill Neidjie and the Genesis of *Story About Feeling*

Appreciating *Story About Feeling* as literary ethnobotany necessitates understanding Neidjie's lifelong commitment to land and culture. The son of Nardampala and Lucy Wirlmaka, "Big" Bill Neidjie was born at Alawany-dajawany along the East Alligator River in the Northern Territory sometime between 1911 and 1913 (AIATSIS; Keith Taylor "A Brief Biography" vii). After spending his childhood predominantly on the river's western side—the land of the Bunitj Clan to which his father belonged—Neidjie attended school between 1926-28 at Oenpelli Mission (later renamed Gunbalanya) in West Arnhem Land. Following his father's death in 1928, he relocated with his mother to

Cooper Creek (also known as Barcoo River) where they camped and subsisted on bush tucker for nearly four years (Mackinolty, para. 7; Keith Taylor "A Brief Biography" vii). The esteemed cultural custodian and water buffalo hunter, Billy Manilungu, taught Neidjie Aboriginal *law* (ancestral obligations) and *bininj* (traditional ways) during his adolescence.

For close to ten years, Neidjie then laboured at timber camps around Buffalo Creek and Van Diemen Gulf in the Northern Territory. During the Second World War, he chopped and hauled mangrove timber to supply the Cape Don lighthouse and radar station. In the 1960s and '70s, furthermore, Neidjie worked as a gardener in Darwin and a forester on the Cobourg Peninsula (Mackinolty, para. 9). Like other Aboriginal workers of the era, he was often remunerated not in cash but in rations of tea, sugar, flour, tobacco, and meat. Although he remained distanced from his family's home-country until the late 1970s, he nevertheless sustained a pragmatic relationship with trees and other plants significant to the Aboriginal cultures of the "Top End" (the northernmost part of the Australian continent).

In 1979, Neidjie returned to his Bunitj Clan land, an area north-west of the Jabiluka uranium mine with an eastern border stretching to the East Alligator River into the remote Arnhem Land region. The move back to his father's country came soon after the Ranger Uranium Environmental Inquiry of 1975-77, a committee convened by the Gough Whitlam Government to assess the interlinked environmental and cultural implications of uranium mining in the Alligator Rivers region. Although ultimately recommending that uranium mining proceed under strict monitoring and regulation, the report advocated the creation of an Aboriginal Land Trust and the gazetting of a national park: "An advantage of the recommendations we have made with regard to Aboriginal ownership of land and the creation of the national park is that there will be people who have the interest and knowledge to protect the environment from the consequences of the mining operations" (Fox 323). As a cultural leader with "interest and knowledge to protect the environment," Neidjie provided testimony in 1980-81 as part of the Alligator Rivers Stage II Land claim, the success of which further propelled the establishment of Kakadu National Park (AIATSIS, "Biography," para. 4). In the years preceding his death at East Alligator Ranger Station in 2002, he resided at the Cannon Hill homestead near the 40,000-year-old rock art site, Ubirr, where he was initiated as a young man in the early 1940s.

Neidjie's versal publications *Kakadu Man* (recorded and transcribed by anthropologists Stephen Davis and Allan Fox, appearing originally in 1985 with revised editions released in 1986 and 2002), *Story About Feeling* (with Keith

Taylor, 1989), and posthumous *Old Man's Story* (with Mark Lang, 2015) coalesce his long-term dedication to an inclusive approach to cultural custodianship that involves rendering traditional stories—such as those about flora and fauna—accessible to non-Indigenous audiences. With Stephen Davis and Felix Holmes, Neidjie also co-authored *Indjuwanydjuwa*, a technical report released in 1982 that documents the principal ceremonial sites of Bunitj Clan country (S. Davis et al.). Like his other publications, *Story About Feeling* grew from a series of recorded conversations between Neidjie and an interviewer (one or more) over an extended period, in this case, with Keith Taylor for two months in October and November 1982 (Keith Taylor "Preface" v). As Michael Farrell observes, the verse-narrative "is not one story only, but a number of stories and observations transcribed in free verse form" (1).

Foregrounding the book's distinctive hybridization of poetry and prose, Kombumerri-Munaljahlai scholar Christine Black characterizes *Story About Feeling* in various terms as "philosophical prose," "Aboriginal philosophical poetry," "ceremonial" literature, and "cosmological narrative" (Black 24–6). In her view, the work is singularly attentive to *djang*, the primordial energy underlying feeling and animating the universe in Gaagudju Dreaming, particularly with respect to the Creator Being Indjuwanydjuwa. For Black, Dreaming signifies "a time out of time [. . .] a state of timeless being in which the spirit resides," an ancestrally-derived concept that contrasts acutely with the normative connotations of the English term dream (28).[1] Notwithstanding the perspicuity of Black's reading of *Story About Feeling*, the text's narrativization of more-than-human subjectivities is absent from her analysis.

Indeed, the most prominent stylistic element of Neidjie's literary work is its sinuous, uninhibited narrative movement across the categorical binaries that tend to burden non-Indigenous thought: philosophy and poetry, textuality and orality, disquisition and conversation, deliberation and spontaneity, earth and spirit, "physics and metaphysics" (Black 32), the sacred and profane, and the seen and unseen. In Black's jurisprudential (Aboriginal law-based) reading, *Story About Feeling* constitutes "a poetic cycle" or "oratory" that represents the

[1] In the 1950s, the Australian anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner devised the term *Dreaming* to refer to "[. . .] many things in one. Among them, a kind of narrative to things that once happened; a kind of charter of things that still happen; and a kind of *logos* or principle of order transcending everything significant for Aboriginal man. If I am correct in saying so, it is much more complex philosophically than we have so far realised" (47). For Australian Aboriginal people, *Dreaming* encompasses stories of customs, totems, spirits, and places. The all-embracing term is also intimately related to *Country*, a multi-dimensional signifier comprising people, land, soils, minerals, water, sea, sky, air, animals, plants, and other beings as well as the biocultural interconnections between them (see Rose).

performative, public, and collective emphases of Neidjie's literary production as a whole (25). Positioned along an "oral-written continuum," the work underscores how "almost 250 years of colonisation and dispossession have undermined Indigenous peoples and their self-determination" in Australia (Robinson and Raven 31, 32).

Neidjie understood his story-telling gift as a means of communicating to Indigenous and non-Indigenous people the urgency of protecting land and culture (S. Davis in Ballyn 59). In *Story About Feeling*, uranium mining in the Kakadu area, road construction, the despoliation of ceremonial sites, and the cutting down of sacred trees are manifestations of neocolonial intrusion into Aboriginal country. In particular, the final two chapters "Earth" and "We Like White-Man All Right" advance an extended critique of the ethics of mining and the incentives employed by companies to garner the cooperation of Aboriginal communities (Morrissey 8). As Farrell further elaborates, *Story About Feeling* is "both a traditional story and a contemporary one. It warns about mining, of the sickness caused by uranium and the fatal aspect of money, and of the big roads that destroy the country" (10). In "Earth," for example, Neidjie writes, "Well e can make money. / E get im from underneath, riches in the ground. / E make million, million might be. / But trouble is…dying quick!" (149).

Presented entirely in Aboriginal English, *Story About Feeling* uses a distinctly conversational tone that invites the reader into the mesh of Gaagudju cosmology. There is an all-embracing sense of the story-poem's speaker having a free-ranging "yarn" with the interviewer. Rather than imperial Anglo-Australian English, Neidjie's everyday language was Gunwinggu (Kunwinjku), a linguistic-cultural group incorporating the traditional lands of the Bininj people and closely related to the now-extinct Gaagudju language of the Kakadu National Park area (Ballyn 59). Widely spoken in West Arnhem Land, Gunwinggu was described by the anthropologist Arthur Capell in 1941 as "a useful *lingua franca*" (371). In a follow-up study from 1942, Capell noted that Gunwinggu draws no distinction between inclusive and exclusive pronouns—instead preferring "oblique" pronouns—and posits minimal gender differences (35).

Throughout *Story About Feeling*, Neidjie's privileging of the radically-inclusive, subjectivity-obscuring pronoun "e" enfolds the human and non-human, animate and inanimate, and earthly and celestial. Influenced by Gunwinguu linguistic formations, this bold familiarization of language evokes an intensity of interaction between human personae and more-than-human beings. In reference to its literary-ethnobotanical function, the prominent recurrence of "e" elides strict demarcations between human and vegetal subjects. The pronomial

creolization thus situates plants and people in dialogue rather than opposition, engendering relationality rather than estrangement. As Philip Morrissey observes astutely, Aboriginal English in *Story About Feeling* is "neither ethnocentric, imperialising nor objectifying in its mode. The use of the pronoun 'e' means that an equal subjecthood is attributed to male and female, flora and fauna, natural phenomena and ancestral beings" (2). In terms comparable to Morrissey, Black contends that "the seemingly 'naïve' language is informed by an extremely complex, indeed sophisticated, set of ideas—ideas that the uninformed or dialect-deaf reader will miss" (26).

The spontaneous and syncretic quality that pervades *Story About Feeling* can be understood, in part, as a function of its ethnopoetic derivation and verse-narrative form. As Stephen Davis elaborates, "none of the material recorded was prepared in advance. There were a number of things that Bill wanted to talk about as different situations were uppermost in his mind" (qtd. in Ballyn 60). Neidjie's language is marked by "strong adjectives in conjunction with the nouns which just 'punch' out the concept. It's a no compromise punchy meaningful English. It's long on meaning and short on grammar" (S. Davis qtd. in Ballyn 61). The text's unprompted, conversational, and linguistically-transgressive style aligns well with *ethnopoetics*, an approach to the textual adaptation of oral narratives focused on accommodating the performative elements that can be lost or minimized in prose (Bauman; Hymes; Rothenberg). As a case in point, Goolarabooloo Elder Paddy Roe's collaboration with a non-Indigenous artist and ethnographer, published originally in 1984 as *Reading the Country*, is a well-known multimodal ethnopoetic text (Benterrak et al.). Literary scholars have also drawn parallels between *Story About Feeling* and the long-form, story-driven poetics of William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens (Brady 42-3) as well as the work of American poet David Antin and Australian poet Chris Mann (Farrell 1). Additional synergies, moreover, could be said to exist between Neidjie's verse-narratives and experimental ecopoetics, notably the radical landscape tradition of mid-twentieth-century Britain (Tarlo 2011). What such well-intended appraisals (Black; Brady; Farrell; Morrissey; Wrigley) wholly neglect, however, is the pronounced ethnobotanical orientation of Neidjie's verse-narratives. I thus depart from previous studies of Neidjie's work by framing *Story About Feeling* as a landmark work of Aboriginal Australian literary ethnobotany—one which engenders human-plant relationality while harmonizing Indigenous, poetic, and scientific epistemologies of vegetal life.

Intercorporeality: Bodily Homologies and Somatic Congruences

One of Neidjie's principal concerns in *Story About Feeling* is the avaricious exploitation of Country at the hands of corporate mining. The verse-narrative figures environmental disturbance, including the clearance of sacred trees to make way for roads, as a pathology of the earth-(plant)-body (Black 31-2). Rather than a fleshly manifestation of a strongly delineated subjectivity, the human body in *Story About Feeling* is entangled with(*in*) the somatic presences of plants, land, and cosmos through a kind of multiscalar, multiversal intercorporeality (Morrissey 2). Originally posited by phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the idea of intercorporeality foregrounds "the role of embodied interactions between the self and the other in the process of social understanding [. . .] Through these embodied interactions, intersubjective meanings are created and directly shared between the self and the other, without being mediated by mental representations" (Tanaka 455). Neidjie narrativizes human-plant communication as an intensely embodied interaction—as an enfleshed phenomenon—through his recurrent invocation of the manifold bodily homologies and somatic congruences between native plants and Indigenous people.[2] Defined as a structural similarity between organismic anatomies (the wings of birds, for example, as comparable to the arms of primates), homology is thought to result from evolutionary diversification from a mutual progenitor. Notwithstanding the idea's scientific provenance, homology offers a generative framework for appreciating Aboriginal Creation narratives such as, for instance, in the Illawarra where the broken heart of the Dreaming Ancestor Krubi transubstantiates into the waratah blossom (McLeod). The notion of somatic congruence, furthermore, underscores that the agreement or harmonization of bodies necessarily happens within the deep-time, kin-based ontological groundwork of Aboriginal *law*. As a case in point, the section "When You Sleep . . . Blood E Pumping" (Neidjie 2-4) in the first chapter "Laying Down" (1-20) homologizes the processes of transpiration and photosynthesis in trees with blood circulation in the bodies of mammals, thus heightening somatic empathy—bodily "feeling"—for non-human beings (Morrissey 2). An embodied ethics of native Australian plants in this way takes shape.

[2] The ideas of human-plant intercorporeality, bodily homology, and somatic congruence propounded here complement Stacy Alaimo's formulation of *trans-corporeality* as a posthumanist concept "emphasizing the material interconnections of human corporeality with the more-than-human world" (2).

Neidjie's versification of intercorporeality reflects an Indigenous understanding of *plant embodiment*—the idea that trees and other botanical life forms possess sensing bodies (although of course radically different from our own) through which somatic relationality between the vegetal self and the non-vegetal other mediates ecological understanding. In contrast, the Western technoscientific tradition has largely disavowed the vegetal body as an integrated whole through the entrenched paradigm of plants as genetic repositories, mechanical assemblages, exploitable materials, and aestheticized images fixated hypersexually on the reproductive anatomies of flowers (anthers, stigmas, petals, sepals, etc.) (Ryan *Plants in Contemporary Poetry* 53-80). In the late-eighteenth century, however, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe founded plant morphology, a countertradition focused on the temporal emergence of the whole plant (Kaplan 1712). In Goethe's conception, the Bauplan (body plan) provides the organizational framework—the botanical blueprint, if you will—propagating the features of symmetry, segmentation, and orientation that typify the vegetal corpus (Kaplan 1717). Goethe maintained that flowers and fruits can be considered fractalizations of foliage (Cabej 42). Appearing originally in 1790, *The Metamorphosis of Plants* introduces the "laws of metamorphosis by which nature produces one part through another, creating a great variety of forms through the modification of a single organ . . . . The process by which one and the same organ appears in a variety of forms has been called the metamorphosis of plants" (Goethe 5-6). Holistic in emphasis, Goethe's botanical morphology positions plants "not by themselves but in an organismic relation to one another" yet without negating their aesthetic, cultural, and spiritual import (Bloch 313).

Of course, I am reticent to characterize Neidjie as a Goethean morphologist or phenomenologist. It is nonetheless crucial, however, to acknowledge the centrality of vegetal embodiment to *Story About Feeling* and, moreover, to recognize how Indigenous perceptions of plants synchronize, to an extent, with the Goethean countertradition of holism advanced in recent decades in the field of vegetal cognition (for example, by Baluška et al.). For, as I have argued, Neidjie's literary ethnobotany is predicated on an elegant, uninhibited narrative movement across the categorical oppositions that have historically impeded human-plant relationality—Indigeneity vs. Settlerism, intuition vs. intellect, spirit vs. body, individual vs. species, poetry vs. prose, story vs. disquisition, and so forth (Ryan *Green Sense*). In the text, human-vegetal intercorporeality constitutes one mode of facilitating relations between people and plants. In turn, bodily homologies and somatic congruences mediate this intercorporeality. My assertions here gain purchase in "Laying Down," the first chapter of the verse-narrative:

Tree, grass, star . . .
because star and tree working with you.
We got blood pressure
but same thing . . . spirit on your body,
but e working with you. (Neidjie 2)

That tree same thing.
Your body, my body I suppose,
I'm same as you . . . anyone.
Tree working when you sleeping and dream. (Neidjie 3)

Deceptively simple, these lines in fact deftly traverse the divisions between plant, human, spirit, and universe. The serialization of "tree, grass, star" in the first line juxtaposes heterogeneous subjectivities, upholding interrelation without expunging identity. Rather than a figurative or metaphorical tactic, the invocation of "blood pressure" constitutes a material homology that implicates the arboreal and vegetal in the human and celestial. The blood pressure homology, furthermore, emerges from the holistic contexts of Gaagudju Dreaming and Aboriginal law.

Bodily homologies and somatic congruences continue throughout "Laying Down." The pervasive intercorporeality produces a robust feeling of affection and empathy for—as well as identification and consanguinity with—the lives of grasses and trees. Decentering a purely verbal semiotics, communication between plants and humans here arises on an unrestrained, nonverbal, affective-kinesthetic level:

I love it tree because e love me too.
E watching me same as you
tree e working with your body, my body,
e working with us.
While you sleep e working.
Daylight, when you walking around, e work too.

That tree, grass . . . that all like our father.
Dirt, earth, I sleep with this earth.
Grass . . . just like your brother.
In my blood in my arm this grass. (Neidjie 4)

The line "tree e working with your body, my body" signifies interdependency between plants and humans. Based on the mutual feeling of love, the intercorporeal mesh of beings and elements mediates human-tree communication as a function of Gaagudju Dreaming. Repeated in previous lines in the chapter, moreover, the phrase "your body, my body" structurally approximates somatic congruence and engenders corporeal propinquity. The radically-inclusive

pronoun "e" encompasses manifold subjectivities—both animate and inanimate—within the collective whole. The final line—"In my blood in my arm this grass"—powerfully homologizes human blood and grass sap, both of which are innervated by the vital force, or *djang*, of the Dreaming.

Affect: Sensory Entanglements and Material Practices

As an affective literary ethnobotany, *Story About Feeling* narrativizes the sensory entanglements and material interactions between native plants and Indigenous people. In this regard, Farrell argues that Neidjie's work represents a "new affective paradigm" in Australian poetry (7). In Farrell's appraisal, Neidjie's paradigm, in part, involves attributing agency to plants and other life forms, as conveyed in the first chapter's final line: "Tree e start moving round and feeling" (Neidjie 19). Farrell, however, disregards the Dreaming provenance of affect in *Story About Feeling* and, instead, develops spurious comparisons between Neidjie, John Shaw Neilson (Australian poet, 1872-1942), and Percy Shelley. Farrell's conception of "'geo-affect' or land feeling" (10), furthermore, diminishes the significance of more-than-human agency to Neidjie's dialogic of humankind *affecting* plants and, conversely, humankind *being affected by* plants. In comparison to Farrell's geo-affect, recent theorizations of affect in human geography, social psychology, and other disciplines call attention to bodies *affected by*—and *affecting*—other bodies within ecological milieux. Over the last two decades, the emergence of critical affect studies can be attributed to the writings of Brian Massumi, Eve Sedgwick, Adam Frank, and others. Synonymous neither with emotion nor embodiment—but rather involving the synergetic concurrence of both across time and space—affect can be understood as "modulated intensities" (Ahern 1) or "embodied capacities—phenomena that arise and circulate as intensities among assemblages" (Bladow and Ladino 6).

As empirical studies increasingly affirm, plants are not simply the objects of our senses but exercise their own sensory faculties in negotiating ecological niches and forging relations with other organisms (Chamovitz; Karban; Mescher and De Moraes). Plants perceive light through their leaves and stems. Sensitive to temperature changes and tactile stimulation, plants transmit and receive chemical signals (odours) to communicate with humans, animals, insects, and fellow plants. Their gustatory capacity enables plants to anticipate and adapt to dangers, such as grazing by herbivores and desiccation by drought. The premise that sensing plants are genetically, ecologically, and physiologically kindred to animals helps to dismantle the rigid demarcations between animals and plants

in terms of their respective materialities—flesh in hierarchical opposition to cellulose, brains to roots, veins to phloem, and blood to sap. The greater harmonization of plant, animal, and human bodies also problematizes the Aristotelian *scala naturae* delineating between organisms according to "powers of soul," in which vegetative ensoulment proves the basest and the intellective the highest (Lovejoy 58). At the same time, understanding plants as embodied agents negotiating environments through complex sensory exchanges counters "zoocentrism" as the enfranchisement of mammals—including human beings—above all others (Callicott 462–63). Through their multisensorial capacities, sessile plant bodies interact with the mobile bodies of insects, birds, mammals, and humans. Yet, rather than unidirectionally acting *upon* the vegetal corpus, these non-vegetal bodies act *with* plants in co-agential relation.

In *Story About Feeling*, human-vegetal sensory entanglements—specifically those engaging sensation (touch), olfaction (smell), and gustation (taste)—manifest in the material interactions between Indigenous people and native flora. Yet, spanning the natural and social sciences, the field of ethnobotany has historically reduced human-plant interactions mechanically to their use-value (Ryan *Green Sense*, Chapter 1). Initially known as "aboriginal botany," ethnobotany is "the scientific study of the relationship between plants and people. It includes traditional and modern knowledge of plants used for medicine, food, fibres, building materials, art, cosmetics, dyes, agrochemicals, fuel, religion, rituals, and magic. [The field examines] how people classify, identify, and relate to plants along with reciprocal interactions of plants and people" (Schmidt 3). Ethnobotany largely promulgates a utilitarianist stance on plant *life* that denies its agency—that repudiates its *liveliness* through an overly granular interpretation of what certain species are "good for" in particular cultures. The field also shares a close connection to "economic botany," the investigation of the fiscal, agricultural, and commercial potential of plants used in Indigenous cultures (Schmidt 3). In the late-eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth century, the ethnobotanical paradigm emerged in Australia from the imperialist expeditions of settlers, colonists, mariners, adventurers, cartographers, chroniclers, and naturalists. As a case in point, *pituri* (*Duboisia hopwoodii*) is a tall shrub native to the Simpson Desert that has been dried, mixed with ash, and chewed as a bush tobacco (Keogh 199). Explorer-botanist Ferdinand von Mueller in 1878 provided the first Anglo-European ethnobotanical account of the species (Curl). In contemporary Australia, ethnobotany has been implicated in the bioprospecting of medicinal compounds and the violation of Indigenous intellectual property rights related to the healing plants (Blakeney).

Recognizing the limits of ethnobotany without rejecting the paradigm

completely, literary ethnobotany extends the decolonial praxis of Linda Tuhiwai Smith and other Indigenous scholars to develop an affective model of human-plant relationality based on multiple interacting agencies. What is more, literary ethnobotany looks toward the potential for respectful rapprochement—epistemological reconciliation—between Indigenous, poetic, and scientific understandings of flora (Ryan "Towards Literary Ethnobotany") and ecosystems such as rivers (Robertson et al.). Affective literary ethnobotany brings to prominence the material exchanges between plants and people based on proximate transactions of eating, tasting, smelling, and touching. In *Story About Feeling*, the affective-ethnobotanical mode I am outlining becomes evident in Neidjie's narrative of Aboriginal cultural knowledge of yam procurement and preparation. One of Neidjie's foremost concerns was the transmission of traditional botanical knowledge—of yams, paperbarks, and other species—from older to younger generations of Aboriginal people: "You hang on for this country; nobody else. / That way I fight for" (Neidjie 26). An ethics of wild plants emerges in the dialogue between Neidjie and a young bush crafter:

> "*I'm your old-man but I'm telling you!*
> *You dig yam?*"
> "Yes"
> "*Well one of your granny or mother*
> *you digging through the belly.*
> *You must cover im up, cover again.*
> *When you get yam you cover*
> *so no hole through there*
> *because you killing yam other thing.*
> *And you got to hang on . . .* " (Neidjie 25, original emphasis)

The yam ground is homologized with the maternal belly as the tuber emerges from the earth-umbilicus. Extracting the yam necessarily affects other beings, so the harvester must observe respectful protocol and "cover im up." The bottom-right corner of the page, furthermore, features a black-and-white image created by Jack Bunkaniyal of the tuber *nangarn*, enhancing the resonance of the literary-ethnobotanical verse through the visual signification of the yam.

Human-plant communication occurs on a corporeal basis through sense-based transactions such as collecting bush foods. One must be called into the vegetal fold. Botanical nature affords diverse material sustenance, including nourishment and medicine, if only one knows *where* and *how* to look. In the chapter "Warramurrauungi," the root crop *nangarn* yields itself to the harvester but retains its vitality as an animate persona—an "e"—in the plantscape:

> And e teach im. E said . . .

"This: eating.
Red-apple . . . anykind of tucker for the people.
Anykind of tree, yam . . . "

E dig up one long yam, e seen it, e said . . .
"This good tucker!"
E said . . .
"Lily and lily-nuts,

Little ones in the plains . . . they can dig up and eat." (Neidjie 42)

As responsive subjects, not voiceless objects, yams communicate to the human interlocutor through their sensorial registers, material significations, and somatic articulations. Some are long and short whereas others are cheeky, brown, and sour. Neidjie's literary ethnobotany enjoins the reader-listener to soak yams overnight to extract their bitter alkaloids:

Any sort of a some yam . . . little one buried.
This one 'cheeky yam.' E said . . .
"No good! That brown one plenty here.
This one e can soak im all night,
till next morning."

E won't kill you but sour.
But e can throw im in the water
e can eat im next morning . . . oh lovely. (Neidjie 48)

All the while, Neidjie's literary-ethnobotanical narrative foregrounds the medicinal properties of yam as a tonic and cleansing agent. Research indeed confirms that wild yam reduces cholesterol, enhances cardiovascular strength, and supplies antioxidants (Williams 433-34). For Neidjie, whereas raw yam consumption builds blood and tonifies the body, cooked yam purifies the digestive tract:

So long yam e can dig up, e can eat raw
and e can take im cook im if you want to.
Because that mean, raw, e can eat . . .
that flavour for you.
Make more blood and clean your body.
When you eat cook . . . same thing, clean your stomach. (Neidjie 48)

An image created by Bunkaniyal of the root crops *karrbirlk*, *burda*, and *bajdju* concludes the bush tucker narrative, accompanied by the caption, "Yams and tubers, all good food" (reproduced in Neidjie 50). Through these sensory voicings, the yam calls the human into its plenum. Gathering bush foods thus becomes an openness to being summoned or called forth by vegetal nature instead of a practice of ordering or subduing it.

Voice: Sonic Registers and Vegetal Articulations

Another literary-ethnobotanical concept put into narrative form in *Story About Feeling*—and the final idea elaborated in this essay—is *plant-voice*. Neidjie's verse-narrative proffers a medium for Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers alike to consider the *real*—rather than purely *figurative*—potentialities of botanical voice. In its normative anthropocentric framing, the term voice denotes the articulations produced by the human larynx, mouth, tongue, and lips to communicate in discrete tones, registers, and accents, making the presence of the individual known to other beings. To assert that plants have voice(s)—or, at least, that they should not be denied voice—might seem outlandish or specious. Of course, anatomical sense tells us that vegetal life lacks the mechanical structures necessary to vocalize as humans do. For plant-voice to become tenable, then, we must think about voice differently—i.e., as a responsive presencing and corporeal emergence in the world—while refusing its longstanding figurative-symbolic application to vegetal life. Indeed, the metaphorization of voice—as "voice"—appears throughout scientific discourse, where the possibility of plant-voice intervenes as a contentious figuration. The term is applied cautiously, diffidently, and emblematically, often in scare quotes—again, as plant "voice"—in referring to empirical developments in plant-animal and plant-plant communication.

The field of bioacoustics investigates the notion of plants as bearers of voice. The ecological function of sound implies attributes of agency, sentience, and even intelligence in a life form that has been positioned historically as the antithesis of the animal—as *voiceless*, inert, sessile, mechanically acted upon by higher order beings, and characteristically devoid of cognitive powers (Ryan "In the Key of Green?"). The emergent field of phytoacoustics investigates sound emission (*speaking*) and detection in plants (*listening*) (Khait et al.). Phytoacoustic research has the potential to transform "our understanding of the interaction of plants with their environment" (Khait et al. 138). Studies demonstrate that plants produce unique sound signatures facilitating decision-making and enhancing ecological adaptation through auditory networks within habitats and as part of *sonic ecologies* (for example, Gagliano "Green Symphonies"). In perceiving sound—that is, in listening—plants modify their behaviours in response to acoustic stimuli impregnated with vital information about pollinators, herbivores, frugivores, weather, soil conditions, and water availability (Khait et al. 134). Studies of plant-to-plant acoustic communication, moreover, suggest that plants heighten sound emissions when confronted by drought, flooding, fire, grazing, pruning, infestation, and other environmental stressors in order to

prime the chemical defence responses of the neighbouring plants with whom they communicate (Khait et al. 137).

Neidjie's verse-narrative allows us to think of voice differently. This ecological dyad of listening-speaking—perceiving-emitting—coincides with his narrativization of arboreal voice throughout the first and second chapters, "Laying Down" and "Tree." In *Story About Feeling*, the tree's sonic intelligence—its capacity to hear and say as a percipient agent—functions according to *djang*, the primordial energy, or feeling, endemic to Gaagudju Dreaming:

> That tree now, feeling . . .
> e blow . . .
> sit quiet, you speaking . . .
> that tree now e speak . . .
> that wind e blow . . .
> e can listen. (Neidjie 18)

Feeling (*djang*) is the fountainhead of human-plant communication. The causal, recursive, and call-and-response structure of the sestet engenders seamless voicings between tree (plants), wind (elements), and "you" (humans), all of which exert their agencies as beings. The tree is "feeling," the wind replies, then "you speaking," "now e speak," resulting in the "wind e blow." The final line "e can listen" bespeaks the interpenetration of subjectivities—the eliding of delineations between animate beings and inanimate things—that is integral to Gaagudju cosmology. Beyond the hierarchies promulgated by mentation, all phenomena are innervated by the flow of *djang*. As a polyvocal, multispecies, and relational formation, voice is *djang* made manifest, rendered sensible, and activated in everyday materialities. In this manner, and in this case, Neidjie liberates the concept of *voice* from its anglophonic and audiocentric framing as the exclusive domain of the human. Neidjie's poetic disquisition—his "philosophical prose" meditation (Black 24)—on plant-voice continues:

> Tree . . . yes.
> That story e listen.
> Story . . . you'n'me same.
> Grass im listen. (Neidjie 18)
> [. . .]
> Now I telling story I can listen this.
> You listen that wind e come more.
> Tree e start moving round and feeling. (Neidjie 19)

In these stanzas, the Dreaming governs voice as the "original impulse" of being and beings: story, tree, grass, human, and all else (Watts "'Voice' and 'Voicelessness' in Rhetorical Studies" 179). As communication theorist Eric King Watts

observes, in poetic terms, voice is "the sound of affect [that] emanates from the openings that cannot be fully closed; from the ruptures in sign systems, from the breaks in our imaginaries, from the cracks in history. It registers a powerful, some would say passionate, cluster of feelings triggered by life finding a way to announce itself" (Watts "Coda" 259). Through our plurivocal listening(s), "you'n'me same." Neidjie implies that attentiveness to the voice(s) of trees and other vegetal phenomena is an inexorable part of the deep-time biocultural order prescribed by Gaagudju law: "That tree e listen to you, what you! / E got no finger, e can't speak / but that leaf e pumping his" (Neidjie 23).

Phytoacoustic research lies within the broader study of plant neurobiology, the examination of stimulus perception and behavioural adaptation in the botanical world. As previously noted in this article, plants have been shown to communicate with—and expertly manipulate—bacteria, fungi, insects, animals, other plants and, arguably, humans (Baluška and Mancuso 475). In this context, researchers describe the "three pillars of plant neurobiology" as sense perception; chemical and electrical signalling; and adaptive problem-solving (Baluška and Mancuso 475). At the end of the second chapter "Tree," Neidjie's story of arboreal signalling—one passed to him intergenerationally from his grandfather—exhibits striking parallels with plant neurobiology and, specifically, the three "pillars" named above:

> This tree e stay . . . watching you.
> Something . . . this tree.
> If you go by yourself, lie down,
> that tree e can listen.
> Might be e might give you signal.
> Spirit . . . quiet e say . . .
> "Oh, my man coming!"
>
> Something . . . you know, noise.
> You might say . . .
>
> "Hey, what's that!" (Neidjie 35)
>
> [. . .]
>
> My grandpa e said . . .
> "*Yes*.
> *Well leave it . . . that's the tree now*.
> *E tell you somebody coming*.
> *That tree e work*. (Neidjie 36, original emphasis)

The tree listens, speaks, and watches. "E" attends to, cares for, and works with Aboriginal people by announcing that "somebody coming." In its transmissions of a "signal" and some "noise," the intrinsically relational tree-being

communicates empathically through feeling and in accordance with *djang*. The expressive modes of arboreal life—its heterogeneous voice(s)—manifest not only through the tree-body and via the plant-voice but within the polyvocal mesh of Country.

Conclusion: Literary Ethnobotany as Biocultural Intervention

I have argued that literary ethnobotany must be understood as a response to the context of Australian neocolonialism. The vegetal poetics of Neidjie and other Aboriginal Australian poets are integral to comprehending the implications of neocolonial mining development in Australia. As narrated in *Story About Feeling*, uranium mining and its attendant consequence of land clearance threaten to erode the traditional human-plant relations that have sustained the Indigenous cultures of the Top End for millennia. The idea of literary ethnobotany as I have conceptualized it here intervenes in the loss of biocultural knowledge of plants in First Nation societies. Rather than narrowly categorizable as ethnopoetics, ethnographic text, activist poetry, or nostalgic reverie, Neidjie's *Story About Feeling* constitutes a vital means of preserving plant-based knowledge ever more imperilled as botanical-cultural systems deteriorate in an age of climate change catastrophe. Neidjie's verse-narrative boldly reclaims—and elegantly reasserts—the value of deep-time understandings, perceptions. and practices related to vegetal life. His poetic recuperation of traditional botanical knowledge functions as a counterforce to the appropriation of plants as symbols of nationhood or resources to be exploited for economic aggrandizement. For Neidjie, the animacy of botanical nature derives from Gaagudju Dreaming, and specifically the life force of *djang*, but is encountered materially in everyday experience—through intercorporeality, affect, and voice. This deep-time outlook on plants contrasts sharply to the limited temporal scale according to which Anglo-Australian (neo) colonialism operates. By foregrounding the epistemologies of plants encoded in narratives, literary ethnobotany—as a critical optic, à la ecocriticism, ecopoetics, and postcolonial criticism—facilitates new insights into the work that Aboriginal Australian literature performs in the world.

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「那伊樹傾聽著你」：比爾・納迪傑著作《感情的故事》中的文學民族植物學

摘要

本文藉由閱讀澳洲北領地原住民"大"比爾・納迪傑長老的詩歌中有關植物描寫或植物批評，來建構文學民族植物學的概念。作爲文類，文學民族植物學包括詩，散文，劇本，敘事詩，以及其它創作探討植物作爲食物，醫藥，布料，物品，裝飾，佈置，圖騰，老師，代理人或各種人物的文化知識。另一方面，作爲批評閱讀視角，文學民族植物學則闡明納迪傑於1989年出版的《感情的故事》書中文化與植物混雜的特色。透過民族學家基思・泰勒的抄錄翻譯，納迪傑敘述詩篇包含十一個主題，其中更含蓋加古朱土著傳統的植物知識，這個原住民的祖先世居目前澳洲北領地被列爲世界文化與自然遺產的澳洲最大國家公園—卡卡杜國家公園。

關鍵字： 澳洲原住民詩歌，比爾・納迪傑，文學民族植物學，植物批評，植物情動，人與樹的溝通