

LITERARY ETHNOBOTANY AS A SITE OF POSSIBILITY?

Poetry and Traditional Knowledge of Vegetal
Life in the Planthroposcene



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“[...] an aspirational episteme and way of doing life in which people come to recognize their profound interimplication with plants” (Myers 2017)



Bill Neidjie

“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)







Outline

- I. Introduction: Towards Literary Ethnobotany
- II. Aboriginal Australian Poetry
- III. Bill Neidjie and *Story About Feeling* (1989)
- IV. Intercorporeality
- V. Affect
- VI. Voice
- VII. Conclusion: Literary Ethnobotany as Site of Possibility



Antarctic Beech Tree, Point Lookout, New South Wales
Image Credit: The Author



I. Toward Literary Ethnobotany



Ia. Toward Literary Ethnobotany

- Brings **ecocriticism** and **ethnobotany** into dialogue
- Narrates **interactions with, understandings of** and **uses of** plants as foods, fibres, medicines, ornaments, and spiritual totems
- Documents **traditional ecological knowledge** of plants in an era of widespread biodiversity loss
- Includes poetry, prose, fiction, non-fiction, scripts, and digital media



Ib. Towards Literary Ethnobotany

- **Environmental humanities:** applies humanities-based approaches to resolving environmental issues
- **Postcolonial ecocriticism:** locates environmental crisis in colonial and neocolonial discourses
- **Phytocriticism:** attends to the representation of plants in environmental texts
- **Vegetal cognition:** recognises the capacity of plants to learn, communicate, and behave



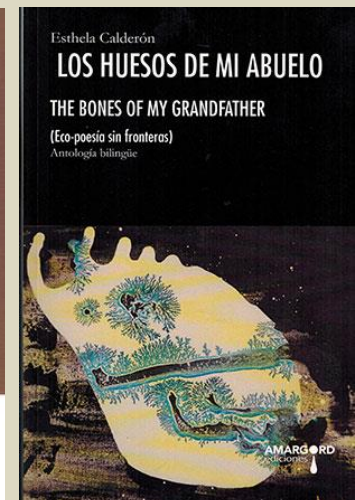
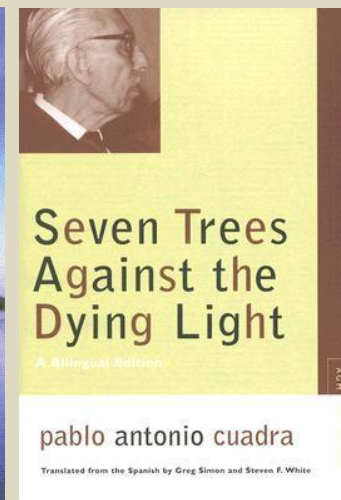
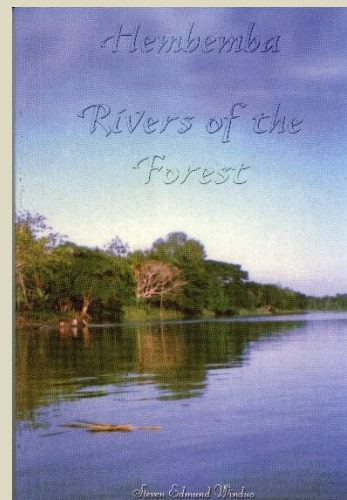
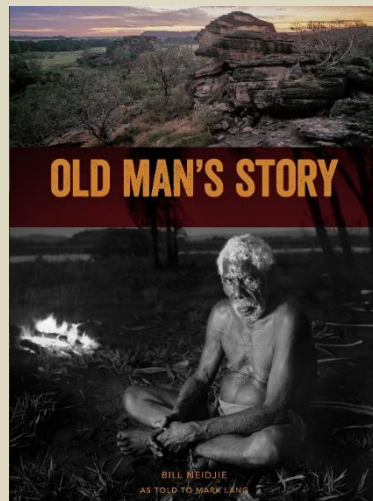
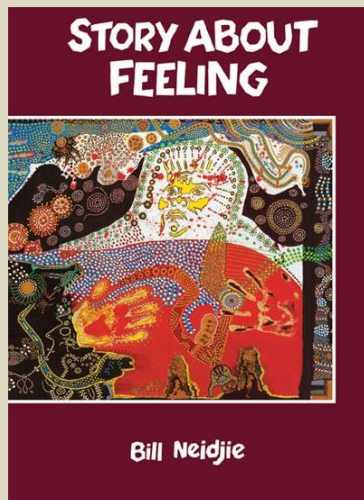
IIc. Toward Literary Ethnobotany

As a genre

- comprises poetry, prose, scripts, verse-narratives, and other creative writing forms
- engages cultural knowledge of plants as food, medicines, fibers, materials, ornaments, decorations, totems, teachers, agents, and personae

As a critical reading framework

- illuminates the cultural-botanical dimensions of a text
- shifts critique away from anthropocentric, 'plant-blind' bias



Ceremony of Love

Jaime Luis Huenún

Last night the trees loved each other like Indians: podocarp and ulmo, Patagonian oak
and *hualle*, *tineo* and litchi, knot to knot, loved each other
so lovingly, Chilean acorn trees
browned each other's bark, so many coigües
kissed each other's roots and beards and new sprouts,
until love awoke
in the birds that had been lulled to sleep
by the feathers of their
own trilling loves.

Correspondingly, the *huinca* shoots
lovingly buried each other, and the *chola*
waters opened their luminous watershed, naming
each other sip by sip, all alone and telling each other: good waters, lovely
waters, oh but we have been violated, Rahue waters,
weeping swallow, flowery, midwifing and still happy,
streams hopping like hares

over the mountains and hills.

And eared doves were soon united
by the same love,
the Inallaos' green
springs, the Huaiquipáns' fierce
honeys, the Llanquilefs' swift
eyes, the breasts of the Relequeos'
thrush, the brown hairs of the Huilitraros'
soapbark tree, the Paillamanques'
new raulí beeches.

Huilliche love, last night they loved more
in the middle of the *chola* grove, under the
perpetual pomegranate Indian sky,
they loved each other, piled up
like water fillies and like lit *anchimallén* fireballs, in the fragrant
dawn they loved each other,
sweetening the seed just
like clay pots filled with *muday*.

Huilliche: the southern portion of the Mapuche Indigenous people of Chile

Rahue: a river in the Los Lagos region of Chile; in its middle course, it flows through the city of Osorno

huinca: name given by the Huilliches to any outsider to their people, especially an enemy

Inallao, Huaiquipán, Llanquilef and Huilitraro: Mapuche last names and lineages

Paillamanque: Lonko Anselmo Paillamanque (d. 2012) was a Huilliche leader who played a key role in creating a network of indigenous parks and in recuperating Mapuche territory, culture and identity

chola: a somewhat derogatory term for mixed-blood castes in the Spanish Empire

anchimallén: mythical Huilliche creatures that take the form of small children and that can transform themselves into flying fireballs, emitting bright light

muday: a fermented drink made of macerated wheat

Jaime Huenún Villa, born in Valdivia, Chile in 1967, is an award-winning Mapuche-Huilliche poet whose books include *Ceremonias* (1999), *Puerto Trakl* (2008), *Reducciones* (2012), *Fanon City Meu* (2018), and *La calle Maldestam y otros territorios apócrifos* (2016). He has received the Pablo Neruda Prize (2003), a Guggenheim Fellowship (2005), and the Prize from the Chilean National Council on Arts and Culture for best book of poetry published in 2013. He has also edited anthologies of Mapuche poetry, including *Epu mari ũlkatufe ta fachantü: 20 poetas mapuche contemporáneos* (Lom, 2003). Two of his books are available in English translation: *Port Trakl* (Diálogos, 2008) and *Fanon City Meu* (Action Books, 2018). Huenún teaches Indigenous poetry at the Universidad Diego Portales in Santiago and works for the Ministry of Cultures, Arts and Patrimony, directing the department of Native Peoples of the Metropolitan Region.

Cynthia Steele is Professor Emerita of Comparative Literature at the University of Washington, Seattle. Her translations include Inés Arredondo, *Underground Rivers* (Nebraska, 1996) and José Emilio Pacheco, *City of Memory* (City Lights, 2001, with David Lauer). Her translations of other poems by Huenún have appeared in *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Washington Square Review*, *Plumwood Mountain*, and *Plume Poetry*. Her translations of other Latin American authors have appeared in *The Chicago Review*, *TriQuarterly*, *The Seattle Review*, *Gulf Coast*, *Lunch Ticket*, *Journal of Literary Translation*, *Natural Bridge*, *Ezra*, *Southern Review*, *Exchanges*, and *Latin American Literary Review*.

II. Aboriginal Australian Poetry



- Grounded in oral traditions and song-poetry with a more than **sixty-thousand-year** lineage
- Reverberates with ethnobotanical allusions often embedded in **Dreaming** (creation) stories
- Emerged as a contemporary form with Oodgeroo Noonuccal's **We Are Going** (1964)



Waratah



“...the sacred web of connections includes not only kinship relations and relations to the land, but also relations to nature and all living things”

-Mary Graham (2008)



“...a democratic space inhabited by a multiverse of beings, of which humans are just one manifestation”

-C.F. Black, *The Land Is the Source of the Law* (2011)



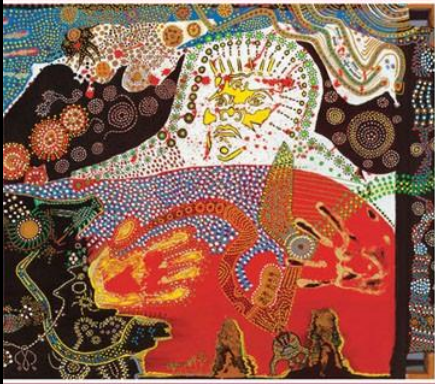


III. Bill Neidjie and *Story About Feeling* (1989)

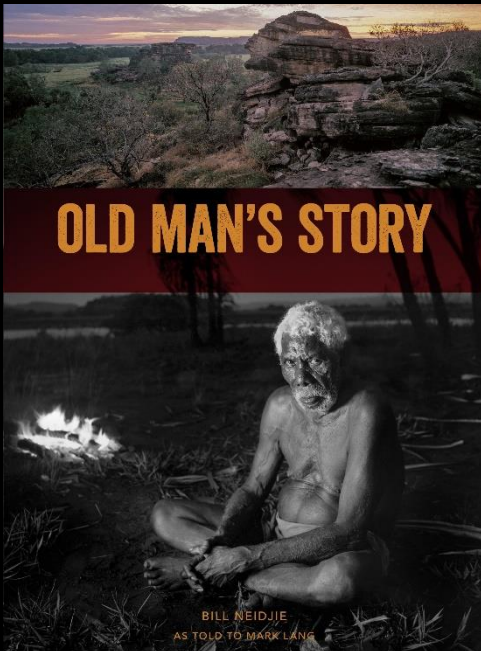


- Senior Elder (or Senior Law Man) of Kakadu National Park and a **traditional owner** of Bunitj estate of northern Kakadu in Northern Territory, Australia
- **Verse-narratives** include *Story About Feeling* (1989) and *Old Man's Story* (2015)
- Demonstrates traditional Gaagadju ontologies of plants as **communicative kin**

STORY ABOUT FEELING



Bill Neidjie



OLD MAN'S STORY

BILL NEIDJIE
AS TOLD TO MARK LANG





Kakadu National Park, NT, Australia



Gwion Gwion (Tassel Bradshaw) figures wearing ornate costumes



IV. Intercorporeality



From *Story About Feeling*

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.

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

V. Affect





From Story About Feeling

*"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..."*



From *Story About Feeling*

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.”

From *Story About Feeling*

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.”



From *Story About Feeling*

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.



VI. Voice

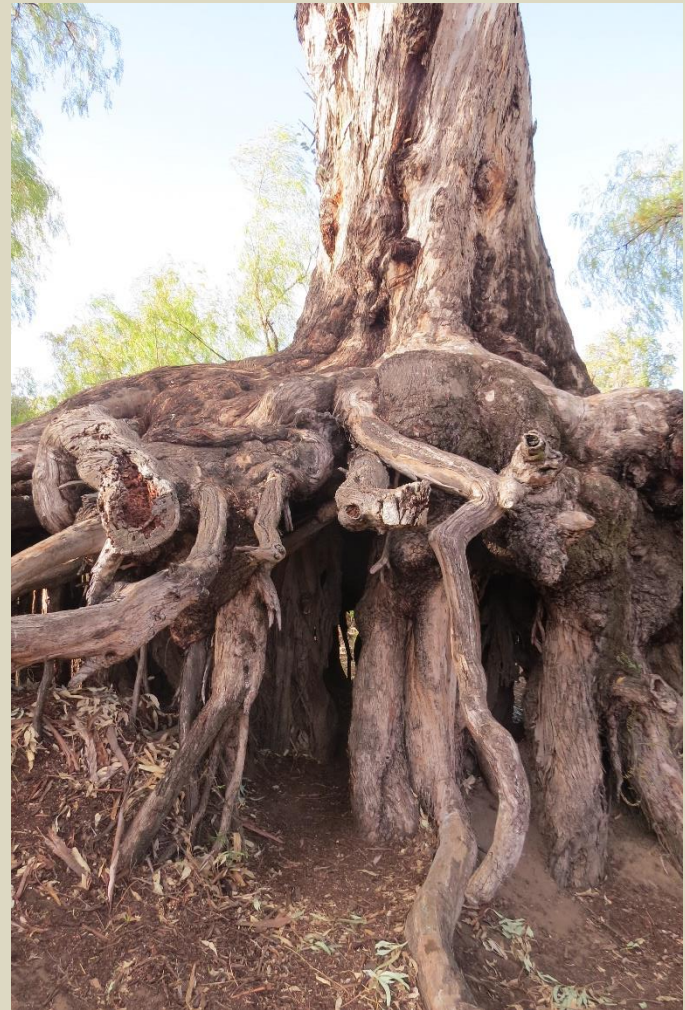




Spotted Gum, Hillgrove, NSW

From *Story About Feeling*

That tree now, feeling...
e blow...
sit quiet, you speaking...
that tree now e speak...
that wind e blow...
e can listen.



From *Story About Feeling*

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.

From *Story About Feeling*

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.

Conclusion

- Literary ethnobotany intervenes in the loss of biocultural knowledge of plants in Indigenous societies
- The poetic recuperation of traditional botanical knowledge functions as a counterforce to the appropriation of plants
- The animacy of botanical nature is encountered materially in everyday experience—through intercorporeality, affect, and voice
- Planthroposcene as “an aspirational episteme and way of doing life in which people come to recognize their profound interimplication with plants” (Myers 2017)





Thank you...

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