

Gija Jumulu: Arboreal Ecocriticism and the Australian Boab

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Abstract The idea of arboreal ecocriticism – or *dendrocriticism* – reflects the burgeoning interest in vegetal life within the Environmental Humanities. Concerned with arboreal texts of diverse kinds, dendrocriticism can be understood as a tree-focused mode of environmental, literary and cultural analysis. This article theorises dendrocriticism in relation to the boab (*Adansonia gregorii*), a large tree endemic to Northern Australia. Narrating boab subjectivity and corporeality, the arboreal texts discussed here include Alec Choate’s poem “Prison Tree, Derby” (1978), Bill Neidjie’s verse narrative *Story About Feeling* (1989), Tim Winton’s novel *Dirt Music* (2001) and Veronica Lake’s poem “Boab Tree” (2012), the latter written from the perspective of Gija Jumulu, a massive boab relocated two-thousand miles from the Kimberley to Perth. In response to global forest decline, prospective areas of dendrocritical focus include, inter alia, the traditional botanical knowledge of indigenous people, scientific studies of vegetal cognition and the limits of dendrocentrism – the privileging of trees over other plants.

Keywords Arboreal ecocriticism. Dendrocriticism. Environmental humanities. Alech Choate. Bill Neidjie. Tim Winton. Veronica Lake. Gija Jumulu.

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1 Introduction

This article develops the idea of arboreal ecocriticism – or *dendro-criticism* – in response to the growing attention to plant life within the Environmental Humanities. On the one hand, dendrocriticism addresses the imperilled status of forest ecosystems globally. On the other, this tree-attuned mode of ecocritical thinking and practice recognises – and engages with – increasing public and scientific awareness of forests as intelligent systems essential to confronting the environmental and social precarities of the present. The article’s theorisation of dendrocriticism, in particular, emphasises the subjectivity and corporeality of arboreal life in reference to the boab (*Adansonia gregorii*), a charismatic tree endemic to Northern Australia and culturally significant to the region’s Aboriginal people.

In 2008, an ancient boab known as Gija Jumulu was transplanted in toto two-thousand miles from the Kimberley region of Western Australia to Kings Park in the state capital of Perth. Although ostensibly successful, the relocation raises questions regarding the capacity of trees to experience the trauma of dispossession. After discussing the case of Gija Jumulu, the article turns to an analysis of representations of *Adansonia gregorii* in diverse boab texts including Alec Choate’s poem “Prison Tree, Derby” (1978), Bill Neidjie’s verse narrative *Story About Feeling* (1989) and Tim Winton’s novel *Dirt Music* (2001). In the context of global forest loss, potential focal points for dendrocriticism include the traditional botanical knowledge of indigenous people, scientific research into vegetal cognition and the limits of *dendrocentrism* – the privileging of trees over other plant forms.

2 Gija Jumulu: The Displacement of a Boab

In combination with nutrient-poor soils and other environmental constraints, the isolation of the Australian land mass over millions of years has given rise to pronounced terrestrial and marine biodiversity. Many Australian species, including 91% of flowering plants, are endemic, that is, occurring nowhere else in a noncultivated state (Steffen et al. 2009, 7-8). Australia’s 330 million acres of forest constitute 17% of the land area (Commonwealth of Australia 2018, 2). Of this overall acreage, indigenous forest estates – owned, managed or accessed for cultural purposes by Aboriginal Australians – represent 173 million acres primarily consisting of eucalypt and acacia species (3). Totalling half of Australia’s arboreal cover, indigenous forest estates also contain 126,000 registered indigenous heritage sites such as rock paintings, dendroglyphs, gnamma holes, birthing stones and ceremonial grounds (21). Due to its predominantly arid ecology, however, Australia remains exceptionally vulnerable to cli-

mate change, species loss, soil erosion, water contamination and other ecological urgencies. Meanwhile, the clearance of ancient forests under the banner of neoliberal progress continues at a perilous rate (Evans 2016). The World Wildlife Fund ranks Eastern Australia (comprising the states of Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland and Tasmania) among eleven global *deforestation fronts* – regions facing imminent, catastrophic tree loss – along with the Amazon, Congo Basin, Greater Mekong and Sumatra. Deforestation in Eastern Australia is a consequence of agricultural, pastoral and mining pressures as well as urban expansion (World Wildlife Fund 2015, 33-4).

Although rare, unpredictable and logistically complex, the transplanting of native trees deemed obstacles to development does occur in Australia. Across the country, from New South Wales to Western Australia, ‘salvage harvests’ rescue slow-growing, long-lived grass trees (*Xanthorrhoea spp.*) and other vulnerable species from decimation especially in suburban areas (Replants.com 2022; State of NSW 2017, 36-7). A salvage event garnering extensive media attention was the relocation of Gija Jumulu, a gargantuan 750-year-old boab tree (*Adansonia gregorii*) trucked two-thousand miles south from the Kimberley region of Western Australia to Kings Park in Perth, the state capital. Occurring in July 2008, the unprecedented four-day operation involved the longest known terrestrial journey of a tree of this size (Government of Western Australia 2021). Weighing 79,000 pounds, Gija Jumulu presented a formidable impediment to the construction of a highway bridge in the Kimberley. Two years later, arborists at Kings Park observed the appearance of necrotic tissue, the removal of which left extensive scarring on the trunk. Notwithstanding uncertainties over the tropical tree’s acclimatisation, in 2016 the pockmarked boab was declared “fighting fit” and the difficult relocation, “a success” (Fernandes 2016). In my visits to Kings Park between 2008 and 2015, though, Gija Jumulu always struck me as out of place in the Mediterranean environment of Perth, an arboreal refugee displaced unsympathetically from the monsoonal Kimberley, a region in Northwest Australia having its own seasonal patterns and climatic cadences.

The botanical genus *Adansonia* is a charismatic tree endemic to Africa, Madagascar and Northern Australia (including the Dampierland, Central Kimberley, Northern Kimberley and Victoria Bonaparte bioregions in Western Australian and the Northern Territory). Ecolinguistic research suggests that patterns of human movement influenced the distribution of the Australian boab in Northern Australia via long-distance seed dispersion (Rangan et al. 2015). Although tolerant of a wide range of habitats, boabs often cluster along seasonal waterways and floodplains. As the only boab species found outside of the African continent, *Adansonia gregorii* exhibits a unique upright flower, most likely an adaptation to pollination by the black flying

fox (*Pteropus alecto*) (Groffen, Rethus, Pettigrew 2016). Alluding to its distinctive bloated trunk, nineteenth-century botanists referred colloquially to the boab as 'bottle tree' and 'gouty stemmed tree'. In the late 1830s, for instance, explorer George Grey (1841) commented:

There was a very remarkable feature in the appearance of this part of the country, caused by the number of gouty stemmed trees [...] These trees grow to a considerable height, and had the appearance of suffering from some disease, but from the circumstances of all of them being affected in the same way, this was undoubtedly their natural state. (111-12)

Praising the boab's edible fruit and gum, Grey (1841) described the species as "a vegetable production of no slight value" and "well known to the natives, for its vicinity is one of their favourite haunts" (112). Similarly extolling the fruit's pleasant flavour, botanist Joseph Maiden (1889) noted the vernacular names "sour gourd" and "cream of tartar tree" (4). In 1895, moreover, Charles Gerber became the first biogeographer to theorise that the *Adansonia* genus originated in Australia and reached Africa via a Gondwanan land bridge (Wickens, Lowe 2008, 312). The modern scientific consensus, nonetheless, maintains that the diffusion of *Adansonia* occurred long after the breakup of Gondwana. Considering that boab fruits are often dispersed by water, transoceanic migration from Australia to Africa is plausible (Bell et al. 2015, 2).

In the history of Australian botany, the boab has been an arboreal curiosity - an 'upside-down tree' as well as a living link between continents and timescapes. Yet, beyond the triumphalist narrative of Gija Jumulu's relocation - a media story rousing the Australian arboreal imagination more than a decade ago - Perth writer Veronica Lake's "Boab Tree" (2012) evokes empathy for the ancient tree as a percipient individual. In Lake's poem, told from the tree's point of view, Gija Jumulu laments the trauma of violent expulsion from the Kimberley - from "my country, my dreaming" - where, for millennia, the boab nourished "the Gija; these be my people" (ll. 5, 10). "Ripped from my heart-place", the tree-speaker travels "south into exile [...] to soil that chills my soul" (ll. 13-14, 16). Although welcomed with a smoking ceremony by Perth's indigenous Noongar people, the boab asserts, in the poem's final line, this is "not my country, not my dreaming" (l. 20). Lake's verse, accordingly, presents a multilayered counternarrative to the state-promulgated version of the boab's displacement in which the tree lacks agency and voice. At the same time, "Boab Tree" underscores that - as sentient personae who belong to particular places - trees have their own Dreamings (lived narratives of creation) intimately connected to Country (land and all that exists). A variant of Gija Jumulu, denoting a "big-bellied tree", Gija Ju-

mulu is a general designator for boabs in the Gija language, spoken by about one-hundred residents of the Halls Creek and Kununurra areas of the Kimberley (Rangan et al. 2015, 8). Enacting an arboreal ethics of care, Gija Elders performed a farewell smoking ceremony to facilitate the boab's transition from its ancestral Country to the urban habitat of Perth: "We want to smoke him because we feel sorry for him. We hope that nothing will happen to your people for taking him out. That's what the smoking means, we don't want people to get sick" (Kings Park and Botanic Garden 2018, 22"-32").¹ The Gija Elders' attention to sustaining human-tree equilibrium also characterises the verse narratives of Gaagudju Elder Bill Neidjie (1989), discussed later in this article within the framework of arboreal ecocriticism or *dendrocriticism*, for short.

3 Dendrocriticism: Critical Readings of Forests and Trees

The case of Gija Jumulu's two-thousand-mile relocation from the Kimberley to Perth provokes an array of critical questions. Is the transplanting of an imperilled tree an act of ecological altruism or an expression of anthropocentric humanism that elides the capacity of arboreal life to experience the trauma of dispossession? How might arboreal subjectivity – understood as a tree's potential for experience, sensation, behaviour, learning, memory and communication – figure into decision-making processes within the intensely managerialist paradigm of environmental conservation? And, more broadly, how might the continuity of human-forest traditions, particularly among indigenous societies, be preserved and strengthened in an era of pervasive biocultural decline? These and other questions fall within the scope of arboreal ecocriticism – or *dendrocriticism* from the Greek *déndron* for 'tree' – characterised as a tree-attuned mode of environmental, literary and cultural analysis. On the one hand, dendrocriticism responds to the vital importance yet precarious status of forest ecosystems globally. To be certain, forests make life on Earth possible by nurturing terrestrial biodiversity, regulating water quality, mitigating climate shifts, affording habitats for pollinators and directly supplying food, fibre, medicine, shelter, well-being and other forms of sustenance to humans and non-humans (FAO, UNEP 2020, 162-3). Global deforestation and forest degradation, nonetheless, continue to accelerate, with an estimated one billion acres of forests converted to agricultural and other uses since 1990 (FAO, UNEP 2020, xvi). On the

¹ Kings Park and Botanic Garden (2018). "10-Year Anniversary of the Mighty Boab Tree". Facebook, 19 July. <https://www.facebook.com/KingsPark.WA/videos/10-year-anniversary-of-the-mighty-boab-tree/1791601467593999/>.

other hand, dendrocriticism recognises – and is informed by – emerging understandings of forests as complex symbiotic systems vital to addressing the interlinked environmental and social challenges of the Anthropocene (Popkin 2019). Indeed, scientific research into tree perception, communication and intelligence has begun to suffuse popular thinking, forming the basis, for instance, of Richard Powers’ recent Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Overstory* (2018) as well as botanical non-fiction such as David George Haskell’s *The Songs of Trees* (2017) and Suzanne Simard’s *Finding the Mother Tree* (2021).

Considering ecocriticism’s steady diversification – in conjunction with the wider societal reawakening to trees – dendrocriticism presents a timely ecohumanistic intervention through its arboreal emphasis. Over the last two decades in particular, ecocriticism has branched into various specialisations underpinned by affect studies, animal studies, biosemiotics, decolonial theory, ecofeminism, geocriticism, postcolonial critique, science and technology studies and other theoretical terrains (Ryan 2020). Evolving from studies of animals in literature, animal texts represent animal life and human-faunal relationships. Zoocriticism, therefore, can be defined as the analysis of individual and collective – wild and domesticated – animals as depicted in literary-cultural works. This animal-focused mode of criticism confronts the animal-human divide normalised through neocolonialism, globalisation, speciesism and other contexts. As Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin (2010) elaborate, zoocriticism addresses animal representations, problematises the othering of animal life and underscores the urgencies of interspecies justice. For Huggan and Tiffin (2010), postcolonial zoocriticism foregrounds a spectrum of issues – from wildlife protection and introduced animals to meat consumption and the role of zoos in popular culture (18). In turn, zoocriticism has profited from the florescence of human-animal studies, a transdisciplinary field examining social and cultural attitudes towards animals (Kalof 2017). Building, then, on this progression – from human-animal studies to zoocriticism to animal texts – arboreal texts can be described as those representing trees, forests and human-sylvan interactions while dendrocriticism is the reading of literary-cultural texts through an arboreal optic. Dendrocriticism reflects current debates in vegetal ethics developed within the nascent field of human-plant studies (Ryan in press). My call for dendrocriticism – as an ethical, heterogeneous and transdisciplinary practice – consolidates foundational ecohumanistic studies of forests including Robert Pogue Harrison’s *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (1992), Jeffrey Theis’ *Writing the Forest in Early Modern England* (2005), Albrecht Classen’s *The Forest in Medieval German Literature* (2015) and Elizabeth Hope Chang’s *Novel Cultivations* (2019), among others. Furthermore, while concerned specifically with the boab, this article recognises the rich tradition of trees in contemporary Aus-

tralian literature, evident, for instance, in Murray Bail's novel *Eucalyptus* (1998) and Germaine Greer's memoir *White Beech* (2013).

In sum, dendrocritical practice strives to understand the complexities of arboreality beyond its arrogation as a screen – as a symbol, metaphor or trope – for the projection of human desire. In this way, dendrocriticism countervails critical methods that construct trees as the voiceless, decorporealised and sentimentalised backdrops of narratives. As such, dendrocriticism constitutes a response to long-standing ecocritical calls for alternatives to analytical frameworks that reduce trees and other non-human beings to “nothing more than a textual function” (Buell 1995, 5). Echoing Michael Marder's (2013) philosophy of plant-thinking, dendrocriticism endeavours to allow trees to “maintain their otherness” by encouraging respect for “the uniqueness of their existence” (8). Recognising the arboreal as an active presence and contributing agent in the world, dendrocriticism considers the ways in which the dynamism of trees, forest communities and human-sylvan assemblages shapes the contours of cultural productions. Dendrocritical analysis thus seeks to articulate how trees ‘talk back’ to – and intervene in – the cultural record (Vieira 2017). What's more, while engaging generatively with the science of plant cognition, this specialised mode of ecocritical practice interrogates the prevailingly positivist discourses surrounding tree specimens, species, genera and communities. In addition to its focus on ethics, dendrocritical analysis integrates ideas of arboreal agency, semiosis, temporality, corporeality and emplacement (Ryan 2018, 1-26). With postcolonial-ecocritical bearing, furthermore, dendrocriticism scrutinises the neoimperial legacies impinging on forest vitality while, at the same time, foregrounding indigenous people's epistemologies of trees – or what might be termed *traditional arboreal knowledge*. These and other dendrocritical orientations are integral to examining literary depictions of the Australian boab.

4 **Arboreal Subjectivity: Aboriginal Australian Perceptions of the Boab**

A traditional humanistic conception of subjectivity tends to privilege the agency and consciousness of the individual (see, for example, Pinn 2021). In contrast, arboreal subjectivity foregrounds the distributed subjectivity proper to trees as percipient agents with endemic modes of intelligence expressed within ecological milieux. The possibility of ‘vegetal subjectivity’ has been debated within human-plant studies (for example, Hall 2011; Marder 2020; Meeker, Szabari 2020). In *Radical Botany* (2020), Natania Meeker and Antónia Szabari contend that, in their divergence “from human and animal models of subjectivity, consciousness, and perception, plants represent a challenge to

an orthodoxy that places humans at the center of the cosmos” (29). Like Meeker and Szabari, Marder (2020) maintains that the very idea of vegetal subjectivity destabilises normative constructions of subjectivity by stressing relational coexistence over individuated identity. In such terms, arboreal subjectivity is more than the anthropomorphisation of trees or the projection of humanised ‘personhood’ on vegetal being (Hall 2011). In addition, the concept of arboreal subjectivity incorporates ideas of communication, memory, kinship and altruism in forests underscored by plant cognition research (Baluška, Gagliano, Witzany 2018; Baluška, Levin 2016). Nevertheless, while plant studies has scrutinised the idea of subjectivity in relation to Western science, philosophy and literature (Gagliano, Ryan, Vieira 2017a), researchers have placed less emphasis on the modes of arboreal perception, feeling and consciousness narrativised in indigenous literary works with animist underpinnings. Indeed, integral to a dendrocritical approach to *Adansonia gregorii* is Aboriginal Australian knowledge of boabs as bearers of subjectivity – as sentient Creation beings who impart biocultural wisdom to humankind.

Boabs are central to the cultural narratives and practices of the Aboriginal people of Northern Australia. Among the Yarralin of the Victoria River region of the Northern Territory, the Dreaming being Walujapi (a female black-headed python) scattered the seeds of trees, including boabs, as she walked across the land (Rose 2000, 42). Local people recognise certain large boabs as sacred trees marking the route Walujapi travelled (Wickens, Lowe 2008, 65). While implicated in Creation stories, boabs also hold considerable everyday material significance. Boab roots offer sources of water in arid environments while the fibrous wood of the trunk can be boiled and consumed as an emergency provision (Wickens, Lowe 2008, 67). Crushed boab pulp has been used to make a beverage sweetened with bush honey, in turn, collected oftentimes from old hollow boabs themselves, as narrated in Neidjie’s long poem *Story About Feeling*: “So e can get im honey. | E can look bush-honey there... hollow tree” (1989, 29, ll. 18-19). The edible fruit described effusively by George Grey and other nineteenth-century explorers can be mashed into a liquid and administered to newborns. What is more, Kimberley people carved various images into boab trunks to create dendroglyphs vital to the biocultural heritage of Australia today (Department of Natural Resources 2011). Grey (1841) surmised that the “successive rows of notches” scratched on boabs indicated “the number of nuts taken each year from the tree” (112-13). Exchanged, gifted or marketed as tourism objects, boab nut carvings featuring historical events and natural phenomena disseminate place-specific cultural knowledge, often internationally (Jebb 2006). Published in 1959, Mary Durack’s classic *Kings in Grass Castles* fictionalises some of the traditional uses of *Adansonia gregorii*. The novel, more specifically, alludes to the construction

of canoes “from the scooped-out trunk of a boab tree which [Aboriginal people] used in bringing mangrove timber from one of the gulf’s islands. In this unique craft they had also made short voyages of exploration” (Durack 1997, 259).

In Neidjie’s *Story About Feeling* (1989), boabs and other primordial tree-beings command respect as ancestral subjects. As an arboreal text tracing oral cosmologies, *Story About Feeling* centres on *djang*, the primordial force that enlivens Gaagudju Dreaming and inspires human-tree relations. *Story About Feeling* manifests Neidjie’s desire to communicate his deep, generational knowledge of Country, Law and the Dreaming to both Aboriginal people and non-indigenous Australians. “Tree”, the poem’s second part, takes the form of an in-depth dialogue between Neidjie, his people and his arboreal progenitors who taught him how to live in balance with the Earth (Neidjie 1989, 21-38). Among the poem’s twelve sections, “Tree” stands out for its intensive narrativisation of the traditional arboreal knowledge of the Gaagudju whose Country encompasses World Heritage-listed – and uranium-rich – Kakadu National Park. Published two decades before Gija Jumulu’s relocation, the following lines portend the removal of the massive boab in 2008 for the construction of a highway bridge:

So I said...
 ‘Well you must knock im down’.
 I didn’t say...
 ‘You might feel it...’
 I said...
 ‘E’s alright, doesn’t matter
 because we need that road’.
 (Neidjie 1989, 22, ll. 9-15)

Throughout “Tree”, Neidjie deploys the radically-inclusive, subjectivity-dissipating pronoun “e” to enfold the human and arboreal within the animate and elemental, the terrene and cosmic. This destabilisation of significatory convention blurs strict Western boundaries between the human, arboreal and celestial. Neidjie’s writing, moreover, positions arboreal subjectivity in terms of empathic identification between people and trees. In this regard, the line “You might feel it” connotes the shared interspecies ramifications of knocking the tree down “because we [settler societies] need that road”.

As a relational mode of interdependent coexistence between life forms, arboreal subjectivity entails human feeling for – and with – trees, thus echoing the Gija Elders’ empathic response to Gija Jumulu: “We want to smoke him because we feel sorry for him” (Kings Park and Botanic Garden 2018, 21”-24”). Comparably, the speaker in *Story About Feeling* admonishes a young man for carelessly chopping down an ancient tree:

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.
(Neidjie 1989, 25, ll. 1-8; italics in the original)

Composed in Aboriginal English, a dialect of standard Australian English, Neidjie's verse enunciates the intercorporeal implications of ecological vandalism - of transgressing the Law governing respectful exchanges between Gaagudju people and trees over millennia. Rather than ontologically predicated on individualisation, the arboreal subjectivity poeticised in *Story About Feeling* asserts the porous co-constitution of humans, trees and others: "*you'll feel it... pain on your back*" (Neidjie 1989, 25, ll. 6-7). The narrator's pressing concern over violating the big tree's right to flourish reflects the Gija Elders' trepidation over Gija Jumulu's displacement from the Kimberley. The violence of cutting defiles the tree as an embodied presence (an arboreal form to be perceived) as well as a percipient subject (an arboreal being to be engaged) who listens, responds, dreams, feels and flourishes within an ecological milieu:

That tree e listen to you, what you!
E got no finger, e can't speak
but that leaf e pumping his.
Way e grow in the night while you sleeping...
you dream something,
that tree and grass same thing...
e grow with your body, your feeling.
(Neidjie 1989, 23, ll. 4-10)

"Tree" intimates an Aboriginal conception of dendro-subjectivity that recognises more-than-human sensation and discloses the potential of trees for embodied response. In this way, Neidjie's work also adumbrates what might be called *arboreal corporeality*. The next section elaborates this idea further in relation to boab dendroglyphs and prison trees, the latter featuring in a poem by Western Australian writer Alec Choate (1978).

5 **Arboreal Corporeality: Dendroglyphs, Prison Trees and Boab Bodies**

With their roots, rhizomes, cambium, sapwood, heartwood, piths, trunks, branches, foliage, flowers and other anatomies, trees are corporeal agents – enfolded beings with bodies radically different yet uncannily kindred to our own. Aboriginal narratives such as Neidjie’s “Tree” inflect indigenous understandings of *arboreal corporeality*. This premise suggests that trees and other vegetal beings possess diverse sense faculties facilitating somatic relationalities within life-worlds (Ryan 2022). In contrast, the Western botanical paradigm tends to renounce the sentient bodies of arboreal beings through engrained suppositions about trees as nothing more than biochemical repositories, mechanical assemblages and appropriable materials. As a countertradition foregrounding the dynamic temporal emergence of the plant body, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe poetically formulated the science of vegetal morphology in *The Metamorphosis of Plants*, first published in 1790. The polymath delineated 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” (Goethe 2009, 5-6). Goethe theorised the *Bauplan*, or body plan, as a framework delineating the features of segmentation, proportion and positionality that constitute the plant corpus as an integrated whole. Extending the plant-thinking of Goethe and others, dendro-criticism underscores the role of arboreal corporeality in mediating diverse human-tree relationships. Considerations of embodiment are especially resonant vis-à-vis the often large, corpulent and voluptuous bodies of Australian boabs inscribed by settlers and converted into makeshift bush prisons throughout the nineteenth century in Northern Australia (Farrell 2016; Grant, Harman 2017; Martin 2013).

Western Australian writer Tim Winton’s *Dirt Music* (2001) deftly evokes trees as vibrant presences. In the novel, boabs suffuse the *genius loci* of the Kimberley. As the itinerant poacher-fisherman Luther Fox approaches the town of Derby while hitching a ride in the back of a truck, the charismatic trees appear with growing frequency: “Their smooth flanks shine after the rain. They stand fat and close, and to Fox they’re preposterous and lovely, like a crowd lining the highway, hip to hip, all arse and head-dress in the sun” (Winton 2001, 258). Although Winton’s diction – “smooth flanks”, “fat and close”, “hip to hip” – analogises the bodies of trees to those of people, the boabs remain “preposterous and lovely” in their deviation from familiar human modes of corporeality. Later in the narrative, while camping on an island, Fox immerses himself in the pleasures of the treescape including:

the hot warm boles of the young boab trees he brushes with his fingertips in passing. The shapes of those trees delight him. Lean-

ers, swooners, flashers, fat and thin. At the edge of them all is one huge ancient tree, festooned with vines and creepers, whose bark is elephantine. There's a glorious asymmetrical splendour about it; it makes him smile just to catch a glimpse as he passes. When he climbs it he finds an ossuary on its outspread limbs where some hefty seabird has hauled mudcrabs aloft to feed on. The broken hulls are thick and white as china plates. (Winton 2001, 307)

The passage corporealises the boabs in their "glorious asymmetrical splendour". More than objects of Fox's aesthetic gratification, however, the trees are microhabitats in themselves; seabirds feeding on mudcrabs in a primordial boab have created an ossuary of hulls as "thick and white as china plates". As the story progresses, the protagonist's interactions with boabs intensify, revealing the affective bonds between people and trees. In a sensuous gesture dispelling the perceptual distance of his initial arrival in Derby, Fox eventually embraces "the slender boabs beside the midden. After sundown their skins are still warm against his cheek" (336).

As these excerpts from *Dirt Music* reveal, boab corporeality is closely connected to the trees' emplacement. One of the objectives of dendrocriticism is to articulate how emplacement - the embodied negotiations between trees and their ancestral habitats - contours the lives of trees and the texts representing them. The corporeal emplacement of *Adansonia gregorii* reflects the species' physiological adaptation to Northern Australian ecosystems over millennia. Older boabs' distinctive bloating, for instance, results from the development of water-sequestering parenchyma cells in response to intermittent rainfall. In arid environments, the short and stout trunks of boabs ensure their survival - as well as the continued existence of other organisms depending on the trees - during periods of drought (Wickens, Lowe 2008, 139). Poetry narrating a sense of Northern Australian place often alludes to the particular corporeality of boabs. In Les Murray's "Order of Perception: West Kimberley" (2013), the "inverted boab trees | flowering on plateaux" (34, ll. 7-8) engender topophilia, an affective disposition towards place. Murray's "Kimberley Brief" (2006), moreover, characterises the eponymous region as "that land of the boab tree" (352, l. 4). Bodily images of *Adansonia gregorii* also feature in Peter Goldsworthy's "Anatomy of a Metaphor" (2017) with its visceral evocation of the "plum-colored boab bulb with thick upspreading roots, | multi-tentacled squid head squirting jets of red ink | squat bull toad bloating and unbloating" (77, sect 2, ll. 12-14). In Bundjalung poet Evelyn Araluen's "Boab" (2021), furthermore, boabs like eagles spiraling overhead constitute part "of this country's muscle" as denizens of Country who know "what to take and where to put it" (76, ll. 5, 7). For Araluen, as for Murray and other poets with arboreal sensibilities, the boab is an integral part of the perceptual order of Northern Australia.

The legacies of boab inscriptions and bush prisons, however, represent enduring colonial impositions on the arboreal body. Across Northern Australia, large boabs bear the historical markings of imperialism. As a case in point, during the North Australia Expedition, Augustus Charles Gregory's party left inscriptions on a boab at Timber Creek in the Northern Territory announcing their departure date - "July 2nd 1856" - and indicating the location of a letter detailing their whereabouts in case of their disappearance (Gregory, Eelsey 1858, 81). Another example is the Derby Prison Tree, a tentacular boab purportedly used as an interim holding cell for Aboriginal prisoners, although this history remains contested. Elizabeth Grant and Kristyn Harman (2017), for example, characterise the Derby Prison Boab's carceral past as a fabrication of dark tourism that peripheralises the tree's sacredness to local Aboriginal people. Notwithstanding the mythologisation of boabs as jails, Alec Choate's "Prison Tree, Derby" (1978, 35) evokes the tree's corporeality in relation to the trauma of incarceration:

Touch this gnarled wood, the scooped out
Body of this boab tree,
And it answers stone, or steel.
(Choate 1978, 35, ll. 1-3)

Choate's narrative poignantly articulates the human-non-human suffering caused by dispossession from land, community and relation: "For here was a prison cell. | Here Man was a kept shadow" (ll. 10-11). Considering the tree's embodiment of this traumatic history, the speaker finds it "strange that leaves | Can still draw life through its walls" (ll. 12-13). The poem's final lines express the human captive's desire for freedom as well as the tree's longing for the liberation of its body appropriated for a cruel agenda: "The unrusting manacles | And bars of the roots' system | Strain deeper, and hold them back" (ll. 25-27). Boab prisons and bark inscriptions such as the Gregory Tree and Derby Prison Tree are examples of living 'boab texts' that highlight dendrocriticism's focus on the textual heterogeneities surrounding trees (Farrell 2016; Martin 2013, 229-31).

6 Conclusion: Dendrocriticism in the Anthropocene

This concluding section briefly outlines potential trajectories for dendrocriticism as a mode of ecocritique inspiring a broader societal shift from the Anthropocene era of pervasive biodiversity loss to the Planthroposcene as "an aspirational episteme [...] in which people come to recognize their profound interimplication with plants" (Myers 2017, 299). To begin with, building on work at the intersection of

ecocriticism and Indigenous studies (for example, Monani, Adamson 2017), dendrocriticism places emphasis on the traditional botanical knowledge and perceptions of indigenous peoples, rural communities and subsistence farmers, among others. In this context, dendrocritics explore the cultivation of plant-based epistemologies through oral works, print-based texts and multimedia narratives – from performances and films to digital art and social media productions. Informed by decolonial practice, dendrocriticism would supply a transdisciplinary basis for examining issues of biopiracy and, specifically, the commercialisation of tree-based foods, fibres, medicines and decorations used customarily by indigenous societies (Subramaniam 2022; Tuhiwai Smith 2012). Consider, for instance, the neem tree (*Azadirachta indica*) integral to the Ayurvedic medical system of India. In 2005, a ten-year campaign led by author-activist Vandana Shiva overturned a patent on an anti-fungal product derived from the tree (*BBC News* 2005). A dendrocritical stance on the commercialisation of neem foregrounds the analysis of heterogeneous arboreal texts such as *Charaka Samhita* and *Sushruta Samhita*, which refer to neem over one-hundred times as the healing agent *Nimba*, Sanskrit for “to give good health” (Rama Murthy et al. 2017, 577).

In dialogue with scientific notions of plant cognition, dendrocriticism formulates new concepts of tree health, well-being and flourishing while examining the complexities of ethics, justice, pain, suffering and intergenerational trauma in the arboreal world. As forests decline globally in the wake of anthropogenic climate upheavals and myriad interrelated factors – ecological, social, political and otherwise – the death of trees and human modes of mourning arboreal loss present significant directions for ethically-engaged transdisciplinary critique (Cunsolo, Landman 2017). Dendrocriticism offers an optic, as well, for illuminating engrained cultural perceptions of weed trees and invasive species in contrast to those regarded as native, desirable, charismatic and therefore of heritage value (Coates 2006, 112-50). What is more, dendrocritical analysis investigates the burgeoning area of interactive vegetal writing, music and art, exemplified by boundary-pushing works such as Wendy Burk’s interspecies poetry collection *Tree Talks: Southern Arizona* (2016) and Jane Tingley’s digital art installation *Foresta Inclusive* (2020). Dendrocriticism, furthermore, nurtures the development of novel approaches to incorporating subjectivity and corporeality into tree research methodologies, a concern flagged by anthropologist John Hartigan (2017). Dendrocriticism, indeed, responds to geographers Owain Jones and Paul Cloke’s (2002) call two decades ago for “more serious recognition of non-human agency in social scientific [and humanistic] enquiry into nature-society relations” (48). Finally, dendrocriticism appraises the limits of *dendrocentrism* – the privileging of trees over other plants – and envisions critical approaches to vegetal life that resist

the marginalisation of bushes, shrubs, orchids, herbs, mosses, liverworts and other comparatively diminutive forms. Although far from an exhaustive elaboration of potential directions for dendrocriticism, these recommendations call attention to the range of ecohumanistic scholarship included within its ambit.

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