Harvest: Jahangirnagar University Studies in Language and Literature, Vol.38, 2023
ISSN 1729-8326

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Indigenous Phytopoetics: Plants, Poetry, and Biocultural Justice

ABSTRACT

This article considers the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) concerning the idea of "biocultural justice" as expressed in the work of Indigenous poets. Building on developments in the field of Indigenous ecopoetics, the article proposes the idea of 'Indigenous phytopoetics' to signify how texts by Indigenous writers narrativize human-plant relationships, critique ecological issues disproportionately impacting Indigenous peoples' access to plants, and inspire place-based expressions of cultural-botanical sovereignty. Attuned to biocultural diversity, Indigenous narratives of plants highlight the significance of botanical life to Indigenous genealogies, ontologies, and epistemologies. Moreover, Indigenous phytopoetic work tends to critique imperialist constructions of plants as objects to be appropriated, commodified, homogenized, exhausted, or eradicated. Indigenous phytopoetic narratives inflect a view of plants – and creative engagements with them – as sources of recuperation, resistance, and reciprocity. Poetic works of this genre thus offer a vibrant medium linking creators, audiences, plants, materials, and technologies in a dynamic interchange over time. In addition to Perez's poetry, notably *Habitat Threshold* (2020) and other works, some key examples of Indigenous phytopoetics include Bill Neidjie's *Story About Feeling* (1989), Steven Edmund Winduo's *Hembemba* (2000), James Thomas Steven's *Combing the Snakes From His Hair* (2002), and Joy Harjo's *How We Became Human* (2004). As a case in point, Aboriginal Australian poet and cultural spokesperson Bill Neidjie's *Story About Feeling* is a verse-narrative focused on the botanical knowledge of the Gaagudju people, whose traditional lands encompass World Heritage-listed Kakadu National Park in the Northern Territory. Neidjie's work engages with SDG Goals 3 (Good Health and

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Well-Being), 10 (Reduced Inequalities), 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), 13 (Climate Action), and 15 (Life on Land). This article theorizes the idea of Indigenous phytopoetics concerning these and other poetic texts that bring the dynamism of plant life and human-plant relations to the fore, thus addressing Sustainable Development Goals through biocultural justice.

Keywords: Aboriginal people; Biocultural justice; Indigenous culture; Plants; Poetry; Sustainable development

Introduction

This article approaches the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in relation to the idea of 'biocultural justice' as expressed in the work of Indigenous poets from Australia, Papua New Guinea, the American Southwest, and Guam. For activist Sanjay Kabir Bavikatte, biocultural rights include access to natural resources, self-determination, cultural sovereignty, and land stewardship. The concept, for Bavikatte, advocates the rights of communities to protect land for purposes of cultural heritage, identification, and longevity. Recognizing nature-culture interrelations, biocultural justice connects with many of the UN's SDGs, such as 10 "Reduced Inequalities" and 15 "Life on Land." Poetry by Indigenous authors engages extensively with biocultural justice and, by extension, the Sustainable Development Goals framework of the UN. The term 'Indigenous phytopoetics' is proposed here to refer to poetic texts by Indigenous writers with an intensive focus on plant life. After theorizing the term, the article provides examples of phytopoetics in the work of four Indigenous writers: Bill Neidjie (Australia), Steven Edmund Winduo (Papua New Guinea), James Thomas Stevens (the American Southwest), and Craig Santos Perez (Guam).

For Craig Santos Perez, the term 'Indigenous ecopoetics' underscores "how the primary themes in native texts express the idea of interconnection and interrelatedness of humans, nature, and other species" ("Indigenous Ecopoetics" para. 14) . Works of Indigenous ecopoetics call attention to the significance of the land to First Nations genealogies, ontologies, and epistemologies; critique colonialist constructions of non-human beings as objects to be appropriated, commodified, or eradicated; inflect a view of non-humans—and creative works produced from and with them—as agents of recuperation, resistance, and reciprocity; and link creators, audiences, land, materials and technologies in dynamic exchange. Building on the concept of Indigenous ecopoetics, 'Indigenous phytopoetics' signifies how texts written by Indigenous writers narrativize human-plant relationships, critique ecological issues disproportionately impacting Indigenous peoples'

access to plants and the knowledge systems surrounding them, and inspire place-based modes of human-plant sovereignty.

Central to the discussion is the idea of 'phytopoetics', which can be understood from three perspectives: poetry, praxis, and poiesis. As a plant-focused ecopoetics, phytopoetics refers to poetic works that attend to the botanical world, the unseen lives of plants, human-flora interrelations, and factors threatening the future of botanical communities. Not restricted to poetry, however, phytopoetics also points more broadly to a social, cultural, psychological, or metaphysical praxis – characterized as an enactment and embodiment – that integrates distinctively vegetative modes of existence. The concept of phytopoetics thus signals the potential for human becoming in the world to harmonize with the poiesis – the emergence and transformation – of plant life over diverse timeframes, across manifold seasons, and within the limits of places. Accordingly, the phytopoetics framework marks a shift from the *representational*, in which language renders a plant as an object and propagates human-vegetal dualisms, to the *intermediational*, in which language constitutes a medium of interchange between intelligent subjects, including plants and other non-human beings (Ryan, "Phytopoetics").

Theoretical Framework

The primary method employed in this study is textual analysis or close textual reading of literary works. In addition to Perez's poetry collection *Habitat Threshold* (2020), key examples of Indigenous phytopoetics include Bill Neidjie's *Story About Feeling* (1989), Steven Winduo's *Hembemba* (2000), James Steven's *Combing the Snakes From His Hair* (2002), and Joy Harjo's *How We Became Human* (2004), among others. The literary texts were read from an ecocritical perspective to ascertain references to cultural traditions involving plants within particular locales. Neidjie's verse-narrative, for example, textualizes the botanical knowledge of the Gaagudju people of Kakadu National Park in the Northern Territory of Australia. Additionally, the poems were analyzed with respect to the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

One of the ways in which Indigenous poetry can be read is ecocritically or for its environmental and ecopolitical implications. Indigenous poems are living, breathing environmental texts, defined broadly as texts—novels, poems, films, oral narratives, visual works, websites, television programmes, magazine articles, advertisements, and so forth—representing the environment, ecological issues, and/or human-nature dynamics. The pioneering American ecocritic Lawrence Buell famously characterized an environmental text as that in which "the non-human environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence" (7). The literary and

historical analysis of environmental texts belongs to the domain of ecocriticism, of which Buell remains a cofounder and influential figure. In a seminal analysis, Cheryll Glotfelty delineated the interdisciplinary field as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment [demonstrating] an earth-centered approach to literary studies" (xviii). Since the 1990s, however, ecocriticism has diversified into manifold specializations such as affective and empirical studies. Several emerging focus areas also include climate change, Covid-19, and the Anthropocene, as well as Indigenous, postcolonial, zoocritical, phytocritical (plant-focused), and ecomedia/eco-communications-based orientations (Ryan, "Ecocriticism"). In the Australian context, for instance, in addition to C.A. Cranston and Robert Zeller's edited volume *The Littoral Zone* (2007), arguably the first in-depth publication on ecocriticism focused on Australia, there is also Brian Elliott's *The Landscape of Australian Poetry*, a groundbreaking proto-ecocritical study (1967).

Another theoretical framework valuable for eliciting the biocultural justice dimensions of Indigenous poetry is ecopoetics. With multifarious significatory registers, the term ecopoetics, on the one hand, refers narrowly to a genre of poetry that expresses prominent ecological values, critiques environmental degradation, and reinforces ethics of the natural world and non-human life. As a literary genre, ecopoetics is often associated with contemporary environmental activism and advocacy. In its literary-activist dimensions, ecopoetics is distinct from nature poetry (related to British Romanticism and the pastoral tradition) and landscape poetry (related to aesthetic appreciation of the visual features of an environment). On the other hand, ecopoetics presents a mode of literary analysis in which any genre of poetry – from any historical period – can be understood through an ecological lens; in other words, literary critics can conduct ecopoetic readings of diverse poems. Moreover, the capacious term has been used to characterize creative environmental activism-based projects generally focused on sustainability, conservation, and human-nature equilibrium. Thus, One can speak of ecopoetic community environmental projects that do not necessarily engage directly or explicitly with poetry but develop a poetic outlook on ecological concerns (Hume and Osborne).

The steady diversification of ecocriticism over time has yielded specialized modes of analysis concerned with constructing animals and plants in literary and cultural texts. Animal texts can be understood as those depicting animal life and human-animal relations. Emerging from animal ethics debates and the broader scholarly field of human-animal studies, abbreviated as HAS, zoo criticism involves processes of critically reading literary-cultural texts through an animal-focused lens. In botanical – or vegetal – terms, plant texts are attentive to plant life and human-flora

relations. Arising from debates in plant ethics and the new academic field of human-plant studies, or HPS, phytocriticism entails the examination of literary-cultural texts through a plant-focused optic (for example, see Pick, Ryan). Also of note is the burgeoning scholarly area of Indigenous ecopoetics, which is crucial to consider in relation to ecological readings of Indigenous poetry (Magrane). Extending existing scholarship in Indigenous ecopoetics, the term 'Indigenous phytopoetics,' as invoked here, signifies how Indigenous authors narrate human-plant entwinements, interrogate ecological concerns diminishing Indigenous communities' access to botanical resources, and energize a sense of identification between people, flora, and other life forms.

Craig Santos Perez characterizes Indigenous ecopoetics as encompassing texts written by Indigenous authors to convey the interrelatedness of people, environments, and more-than-human life ("Indigenous Ecopoetics" para. 14). Attuned to particular beingness of plants in the world (i.e., their modes of adaptation and survival), Indigenous phytopoetic narratives call attention to the significance of botanical life to the genealogies, ontologies, and epistemologies of Indigenous people. Moreover, Indigenous phytopoetic work critiques (neo)colonialist constructions of plants as objects to be appropriated, commodified, homogenized, exhausted, and eradicated. Indigenous phytopoetic narratives thus inflect a view of plants—and creative works derived from them—as sources of recuperation, resistance, and reciprocity (Perez, "Indigenous Ecopoetics"para. 14). Understood in intermediational terms, Indigenous phytopoetics offers a vibrant nexus linking creators, audiences, plants, materials, and technologies in dynamic interchange.

Indigenous Phytopoetry

In addition to Perez's creative work, as evident in his collection *Habitat Threshold* (2020), salient examples of Indigenous phytopoetry include Indigenous Australian Elder Bill Neidjie's verse narrative *Story About Feeling* (1989) and Papua New Guinean author Steven Edmund Winduo's *Hembemba* (2000), all of which can be understood as significant expressions of this plant-focused ecopoetic genre. Kakadu Elder Bill Neidjie was the last surviving speaker of the Gaagudju language of Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, Australia. The Gaagudju people's ancestral lands encompass World Heritage-listed Kakadu National Park in the Northern Territory. Neidjie's verse narratives, *Kakadu Man* (1985) and *Story About Feeling* (1989, translated into English by anthropologist Keith Taylor), extensively narrate Indigenous Australian relationships with plants as food, medicine, materials, totems, kin, and ancestors. Throughout Neidjie's work, human-plant relations based on intimacies of touching, tasting, and smelling convey

ancestral connections between Indigenous Australians and native flora. In the following excerpt from *Story About Feeling*, Neidjie narrativizes Gaagudju knowledge of yam procurement, preparation, and consumption. One of Neidjie's foremost concerns was the transmission of complex seasonally-attuned understandings of yams, paperbarks, and other culturally important plants between generations of Aboriginal people. An ethics of plant life is evident in the dialogue between the speaker and a novice 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 *Story*, 25, italics original)

Neidjie associates the yam ground with the maternal body as the tuber emerges from the earth figured as an umbilicus. Harvesting the yam impacts nearby species, demanding that traditional harvesters "cover im up" with respect in order to ensure long-term ecosystemic regeneration.

Steven Edmund Winduo is a poet, novelist, and scholar from the village of Ulighembi in the Kubalia area of East Sepik Province in the northwest region of mainland Papua New Guinea. He writes in English, Tok Pisin, and Nagum Boiken, his native language. A plant that recurs throughout Winduo's phytopoetry is the okari, integral to the narrative of Lomo'ha, a supernatural hero exiled from his homeland. For the Ulighembi people, Lomo'ha is an influential figure offering a parable of leaving and returning to one's home. In his poetry collection, *Lomo'ha I Am* (1991), Winduo explains that "while out collecting okari nuts in his part of the jungle, Lomo'ha accidentally unplugged the lid that sealed the passage into the spirits' world, or the *waliwuiya*" (40). Stunned by the reappearance of Lomo'ha, the villagers expunged the residues of evil spirits from the hero using ginger and other medicinal forest compounds. The ancestral story connects Lomo'ha and the otherworldly with okari, a tree that yields an almond-flavoured nut cultivated, consumed, and processed into butter. Punctuated by lines in Nagum Boiken, the poem is presented from the perspective of Lomo'ha recollecting the spirit domain. Liberated from the realm of the dead yet no longer at ease among the living, Lomo'ha turns to the land as a spiritual, cultural, and semiotic nexus with the capacity to heal his suffering: "I learned about each mark carved on trees / By unknown

hands which spoke to me" (*Lomo'ha* 40, lines. 15–16). Winduo's poem "Seeds and Roots" from his collection *Hembemba* (2000) continues the narration of the ancestral ties between Ulighembi people and their forests: "Blood of roots so ancient / Roots becoming of seeds / Early passionate moments / Textured clay masks / Sacred forest's mysteries" (12, lines 1–5). The image, "feasting over the birth of Lomo'ha," found later in the poem, expresses the mythological hero's identification with the forest and vegetal species such as okari (12, line 11) (for an in-depth analysis of Winduo's phytopoetics, see Ryan, "If We Return"). As also evident in the work of Bill Neidjie, traditional knowledge, and narratives of plants inform Winduo's phytopoetics.

In the context of Native American literature, poet James Thomas Stevens, a member of the Akwesasne Mohawk Tribe, was born in Niagara Falls, New York. Stevens's free-verse poetry explores the intersection of colonization, memory, and intimacy in regions such as the Southwest and the Great Lakes of the United States. His collection, *Combing the Snakes From His Hair* (2002), alludes to an Iroquois story of healing. Plants are central to Stevens' retelling of Iroquois stories and songs of healing, as indicated by including the author's drawings of prairie flora in the collection. Published in 2017, the poem "El Melon" indicates Stevens' phytopoetics. The poem opens with a direct address to the buffalo gourd, citing its technical name, *Cucurbita foetidissima*, and expressing regret over moving the plant from the cool Great Lakes region to the arid Southwest deserts. From the plant's conspicuous leaf and fruit, poetic attention turns to its roots, "two large as legs," bringing to mind a corresponding image of "your narrow & / southern Italian waist" ("Five Poems" 61, lines 14, 15–16). Stevens invokes the Doctrine of Signatures[1], "that each / healing plant mimics, the shape or colour / of the body part it heals" (61, lines 17–19). Recollecting this ancient pharmacognosy, the poet regards old gourds at the roadside with "spidery sinews / filling their blacked and yawning maws" as healing agents for afflictions of the mouth and throat, perhaps a cure for a disease like cancer (61, lines 25–26). As in other Indigenous phytopoetic writing, the precision of the signifier "you" collapses as human and non-human subjectivities dissolve and interbraid. The final image, "I press the gourd against your mouth," appeals to the buffalo gourd's capacity to heal human suffering and invokes the broader Native American tradition of plant medicine (61, line 29).

In the biocultural context of Guam, there is the work of Craig Santos Perez, a poet, essayist, and professor from the CHamorro people.[2] Perez was born in Mongmong-Toto-Maite, Guam, an unincorporated territory of the United States in the Micronesia subregion of the western Pacific Ocean. Perez wrote the six-part poem "Family Trees" in 2016 for the Guam

Educators Symposium on Soil and Water Conservation. The poem narrates how the poet's father respectfully requests permission from tutelary spirits to enter the forest. His father's chants called forth the names of the trees that provided the people with food, medicine, clothes, tools, canoes, and shelter. In the second part, the repetition of "like us" reinforces the commonalities between people and plants in a postcolonial context:

> "Niyok, Lemmai, Ifit, Yoga', Nunu," he chants
> in a tone of reverence, calling forth the names
> of each tree, each elder, who has provided us
> with food and medicine, clothes and tools,
> canoes, and shelter. Like us, they grew in dark
> wombs, sprouted from seeds, and were nourished
> by the light. Like us, they survived the storms
> of conquest. Like us, roots anchor them to this
> island, giving breath, giving strength to reach
> toward the Pacific sky and blossom. (Perez, "Family Trees" Part 2)

The people regard old trees as elders who share the corporeal impacts of colonization yet have survived "the storms / of conquest." The third part sets his father's conscientiousness in acute contrast to the imperial hubris of eminent domain within the U.S. military's history of ecocide in Guam. Sacred trees, such as hayun lagu, known as fire tree or *Serianthes nelsonii*, cling to survival while the military continues to clear habitat under the guise of ecological mitigation. The final part speaks of resistance inspired by the surviving trees and the CHamorro people's expansive identification with the botanical world "We are the seeds of the last fire tree!" ("Family Trees" Part 6, lines 10–12). As also seen in the poetry of Stevens, Winduo, and Neidjie, Perez's phytopoetics draws intensively from traditional knowledge and stories of plants, forwarding an ethics of care and reciprocity pivotal to biocultural justice in Guam and the Pacific region.

Implications

The textual analysis indicates that works of Indigenous phytopoetics foreground the material, spiritual, and transgenerational interdependencies between people, plants, and places. At the same time, the poetic works featured in this article underscore the capacity of botanical life to witness human trauma and suffering while cleansing its lingering residues in postcolonial societies. The writings of Neidjie, Winduo, Stevens, and Perez construe plants as intelligent agents of Indigenous cultural sovereignty with the capacity to nourish, heal, and inspire. Accordingly, their poetry as a whole narrativizes Sustainable Development Goals 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), 10 (Reduced Inequalities), 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), 13 (Climate Action), and 15 (Life on Land). In *Story About*

Feeling, uranium mining in the Kakadu National Park protected area, highway construction, destroying ceremonial sites, and removing old sacred trees manifest imperialist impacts on Aboriginal land. The final chapters, “Earth” and “We Like White-Man All Right,” critique mining practices and call into question the often deceptive tactics used by companies to obtain permission to mine from Aboriginal communities. In “Earth,” for instance, Neidjie writes, “Well e can make money. / E get im from underneath, riches in the ground. / E make million, million might be. / But the trouble is … dying quick!” (*Story* 149). Neidjie’s verse narrative reveals that Indigenous health and well-being depend significantly on reducing social inequalities, implementing sustainable economic programs in rural Australia, and protecting the land’s ecological integrity in the face of industrial development.

Similarly, Winduo’s phytopoetry foregrounds the impossibility of separating the well-being of people from the health of the environment, including the vitality of plants, rather than opposed to one another, human and more-than-human beings are inextricably interconnected. As evident prominently in Northern Australia, mining operations have seriously impacted Papua New Guinea over many decades. In the 1980s, as a case in point, the Ok Tedi Mine discharged millions of tons of debris into rivers annually. Moreover, the Bougainville conflict resulted from tensions surrounding the Panguna mine that contaminated coastal lowlands and destroyed river systems. These cases highlight the devastating effects of industrial logging, waste disposal, marine pollution, species displacement, and climate change on Indigenous livelihoods in Papua New Guinea. Winduo’s poetry underscores that progress towards any Sustainable Development Goal necessitates parallel action in others, allowing biocultural justice to emerge through a constellation of factors. In a comparable sense, Stevens’ phytopoetry reminds readers that the vitality of plant life in the American Southwest is predicated on ecological stability. The region suffers from extended periods of drought, increasingly intense wildfire seasons, and steadily declining water supplies, all exacerbated by climate disturbance in the arid landscape.

Consequently, climate action is particularly essential to the health and well-being of human and non-human communities in the Southwest. Stevens’ poetry of plants thus provides narrative grounding for Sustainable Development Goals 3, 10, 11, 13, and 15. In a related sense, Perez’s phytopoetry confronts the ecological despoliation of Guam, where climate change and ocean acidification are predicted to severely degrade marine ecosystems in the coming years. In addition to linking to the previously mentioned SDGs, Perez’s poetry intersects with Goal 14 (Life Below Water), emphasizing ocean conservation and the judicious use of marine

resources for sustainable development. In conclusion, Indigenous poetry discloses dimensions of Indigenous biocultural heritage, advancing the possibility of biocultural justice and connecting narratively to Sustainable Development Goals established by the UN. Poetry thus serves as a means of translating SDG goals for impact in the public domain through poetic narratives of people and plant entwinements, bringing biological and cultural domains into dynamic dialogue. In an era of pervasive biocultural decline, the challenge ahead is to (re)imagine new modes of sharing the biosphere with diverse life forms and recognizing plants as far more than mute materials or chemical repositories for human exploitation. This is the unique role of Indigenous phytopoetics in promoting biocultural justice in today's increasingly imperiled world.

Acknowledgments
The author acknowledges Southern Cross University and the University of Notre Dame for research support.

Notes

1. Originating in the medical philosophy of Dioscorides and Galen, circa AD 50 and 200, respectively, the Doctrine of Signatures asserts that plants and other substances resembling parts of the human body can be used by doctors to heal afflictions of those parts. Accordingly, herbalists used a species such as lungwort (*Pulmonaria officinalis*), evoking the lungs, to treat respiratory ailments.
2. The Chamorro people (or Chamoru) are the Indigenous people of the Mariana Islands, presently split between the U.S. territory of Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands of Micronesia. The name 'CHamoru' (in which the first two letters are capitalized) reflects Indigenous orthography and is the preferred spelling among community members.

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