

Bill Neidjie's *Story About Feeling*: Notes on its Themes and Philosophy

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That world e was like that now (Neidjie 1989: 167).

This article undertakes a reading of some of the key themes of *Story About Feeling*, a collection of the late Bill Neidjie's narratives recorded in October and November 1982 by Keith Taylor and published in 1989 by Magabala Books. The genesis of *Story About Feeling* is found in Neidjie's experiences of the sacred in Aboriginal Law and his subsequent interpretation and representation of those experiences for a non-initiated auditor or reader. (The publication *Story About Feeling* is a transcription of only a few narratives from the ongoing story.) Neidjie's narratives include observations of the natural world that surrounds him as he speaks, reflections on social issues and Aboriginal history, discussions of the sacred and cultural practice, and mining. Underlying these disparate and apparently unrelated narratives is the story about feeling. Of the story about feeling itself, Neidjie says:

No good I explain.
If man or woman e don't worry about this story,
Just leave im, just let im go. (121)

In other words, if someone is impervious to the story about feeling let them be; so what follows could be in no sense an explanation or attempted justification of the story itself. Rather it is an engagement with some elements that emerge in my own reading of *Story About Feeling*.

Bill Neidjie was one of a remarkable generation of Aboriginal elders who in the late twentieth century mediated Aboriginal knowledges for a wider audience. These knowledges were individual and originated in each elder's specific engagement with modernity, rather than being the impersonal articulation of a romanticised, primordial wisdom tradition. Other notable members of this generation include Nyigina elder Paddy Roe, who used a dialogic mode of teaching (Roe 1985); Ngarinyin elder Banggal Mowaljarlai, whose densely poetic narratives addressed human and cosmic realities (Mowaljarlai 1993); and Naiyu-based elder Miriam Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann, who developed Aboriginal concepts applicable to Settler eco-spiritual concerns (Stockton 1995). These elders respond to the challenge of modernity for themselves, their communities, the people they live and work with, and ultimately all Australians.

The mildness and patience of the teaching practice of these elders is in stark contrast with the rigorous and uncompromising pedagogy associated with traditional Aboriginal knowledge exchange. In T. G. H. Strehlow's famous account of initiatory pedagogy of the Aranda, the Aranda student hunts and provides meat for his teachers and his own blood for the ceremonies. His teachers sometimes impose physical suffering (tearing off the student's thumbnails at key moments in the teaching) to emphasise the imperative of remembering the teachings, protecting them and maintaining their secrecy (Strehlow 1947: 125-6). From the point of view of pedagogy, the combination of extreme pain with teaching ensures that the knowledge imparted is never forgotten.

In contemporary Australia, Aboriginal communities have found an experiential approach an effective means for providing non-Aboriginal Australians with access to Aboriginal realities. By spending time with Aboriginal people on country, settler Australians can develop feelings of connectedness and empathy. Because it is experiential rather than text based, this form of learning is sometimes seen as more authentic (i.e. closer to an authentic oral Aboriginality) than text-based learning, though in common with Aboriginal knowledges mediated by text it is exoteric or 'outside' in its content. It should be noted that experience itself requires interpretation, although the framework used to do this may be unacknowledged; and if it is to be represented, a choice of language and appropriate discourse is required. Neidjie (as with Paddy Roe and Banggal Mowaljarlai) speaks with an acceptance that his words will be mediated through transcription and print and that new learning relationships will emerge from this. In a dialogue from the 1989 documentary *Kakadu Man*, Neidjie emphasizes the unchanging aspect of the Law and the responsibility to keep it and pass it on, but concludes with a recognition that the manner of learning can change in response to changing social conditions, and that writing has a role in this:

But learning can be different.
 So now I've got to teach my children with book.
 They forget how
 to learn Aboriginal way.
 That why I write this book...
 To bring my children back. (Balson 1989)

In *Story About Feeling* he affirms the value of reading and the act of reading's connection to his telling of the story. Attentive, respectful reading is comparable to listening carefully:

When you read...
 Exactly right and you can feel yourself, anyone.
 That way I feeling myself putting this story.
 You've got to feel. (121)

The state of the reader attuned to feeling is in some ways comparable to Neidjie's state as he narrates the story about feeling. This endorsement of reading and the acceptance of the mediation of text might seem surprising given Neidjie's practice of narrating the story in situ. In the opening narrative of *Story About Feeling*, for instance, as well as making references to place, time and natural phenomena Neidjie also suggests homologies between natural phenomena and humans and emphasises corporeality/intercorporeality:

Well I'll tell you about this story,
 About story where you feel...laying down

 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.
 Even nice wind e blow...having a sleep...
 because that spirit e with you

Listen carefully this, you can hear me.
 I'm telling you because earth just like mother
 and father or brother of you.
 That tree same thing.
 Your body, my body I suppose,
 I'm same as you...anyone.
 Tree working when you sleeping and dream. (2-3)

The selection starts with Neidjie revealing that he is lying down as he begins speaking. The movement of stars as well as the transpiration and photosynthesis of trees is related to the circulation of blood in the human body. In the final section three familial nouns are used to suggest the intensity of the connection of the earth and trees to the human person. More generally, Neidjie suggests the possibility of an intercorporeal subjectivity between humans, trees, birds, animals and earth. (See, for instance, his narrations of the eagle, and trees listening to the story about feeling: 18.) Notwithstanding the irreplaceable richness of this embodied form of teaching, the possibilities for reading as a mode of engaging with the story are in line with what Neidjie sees as the integral logic of feeling. Feeling is not limited by time or space but is manifested through a combination of story and the disposition of the auditor/reader. In one of the most powerful descriptions of the agency of feeling in the text Neidjie says:

They [his uncles] told me, taught me
 and I can feeling.
 Feeling with my blood or body,
 feeling all this tree and country.
 While you sitting down e blow,
 you feel it wind
 and same this country you can look
 but feeling make you.

Feeling make you out there with wind, open place
 because e coming through your body
 because you're like that. (168)

The distinction between the 'inner' esoteric knowledges of the Aboriginal tradition and the 'outside' (the everyday practices and exoteric knowledges of ordinary life) is fundamental to *Story About Feeling's* integrity. This is dealt with most explicitly in the following narration from the section 'King Brown and that Law of Oobarr':

This 'outside' story.
 Anyone can listen, kid, no-matter who
 but that 'inside' story you can't say.
 If you go in Ring-place [sacred ceremony site] middle of a Ring-place,
 you not supposed to tell im anybody...
 But oh, e's nice! (101)

(Here Neidjie, as he often does, uses a semantically intensified form of an everyday word to make his point.)

And later:

Oobarr [Law] too hard to change.

You know, like ‘outside’
 you can change tucker or anything,
 clothes e can change im
 But in Ring-place...never change.
 You change im inside there, you get killed there.
 Because King Brown I think made all this dreaming,
 well we fright [awestruck]! (101)

The fluid nature of cultural practice, here represented by the references to food and clothing, is contrasted with the awesome and eternal aspect of the Law. (As an example of his relative freedom in relation to cultural practices, Bill Neidjie asked that his name continue to be used after his death and organised a wake prior to his death because he wanted to be present when his friends said nice things about him [Toohey 2002: 9].) *Story About Feeling* is unique because of Neidjie’s use of a radical interplay between the sacred and esoteric, and the ‘outside’. This ‘outside’ is not profane or ‘fallen’ in a Christian sense, nor pantheistic: all creatures are unique, not modalities of some divinity.

While respecting the distinction between the ‘outer’ and ‘inner’ knowledges necessary to an initiatic tradition, *Story About Feeling* returns continually to the reality of djang (described in *Story About Feeling’s* glossary as a ‘sacred power emanating from the Dreaming’.) As a point of comparison it is perhaps useful to refer to W. E. H. Stanner’s conversation with an Aboriginal man who attempted to explain this spiritual power to him using images drawn from the contemporary world: ‘“Old man, you listen! Something is there; we do not know what; something.” ... “Like engine, like power, plenty of power, it does hard work; it pushes”’ (cited in Muecke 2004: 114). Neidjie says:

We sitting on top that Djang.
 You sitting on this earth but something under,
 under this ground here. (81)

Story About Feeling is grounded in Neidjie’s experience and knowledge of djang, which functions as an underlying energy/spiritual power that is always in excess of any story, reflection, or observation that it inspires. In a remarkable passage from the section titled ‘King Brown and that Law of Oobarr’, Neidjie describes the experience of ceremony in the sacred Ring-place:

If you go Ring-place...look different there,
 different from here.
 [The space is transfigured, and one might say time becomes space.]
 When you finished from bush [when you’ve completed the ceremony] you’ll be start
 crying.
 You don’t want to come back in ‘outside’ [return to the ‘everyday’ world]
 because everything got to be left there.
 That Man [the King Brown ancestral being] e done it everything there, e left it in the
 bush.
 When they make this Kunapipi, [described in *Story About Feeling’s* glossary as a
 creation, rebirth ceremony]
 that King [The King Brown ancestral being] e’ll come out himself.
 [the King Brown ancestral being will reappear]
 When we finished...e disappeared.

I don't know where e go. You'll be start looking for.
If another Kunapipi, e'll come...same thing. (103)

For Neidjie, after that experience—that encounter with the *mysterium tremendum* of the Law—the return to the everyday is wrenching in its comparative banality. When the ceremony is conducted again the King Brown will, of course, be present to its participants. But additionally for Neidjie, the experience of this *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* continues to resonate as ‘feeling’ in the ‘outside’ world and drives the story about feeling. Neidjie, by virtue of his spiritual stature and participation in the ceremony, is the speaking medium for this feeling. The diverse narratives that make up *Story About Feeling* are connected by feeling itself and ultimately grounded in djang. Feeling, accordingly, as in the story about feeling, is the corollary of the human experience of djang. Neidjie’s conception of the story about feeling is that it is operative in ways that the auditor/reader may not always be aware of. When he says, ‘This story e can listen carefully, e can listen slow’ (3), the suggestion is that the effect of the story is not dependent on the degree of perspicacity of the auditor. Instead:

This story e coming through you body,
e go right down foot and head, fingernail and blood...
through the heart.
And e can feel it because e'll come right through.
And when you sleep you might dream something. (19)

And in the following narrative he stresses the free agency of the story about feeling which reminds the auditor of their connection to the natural world:

Someone can't tell you.
Story e telling you yourself.
E tell you how you feel because tree or earth
Because you brought up with this earth,
Tree, eating, water. (120)

Notwithstanding the multi-dimensional affects of the story and the fact that one can benefit by listening either ‘careful’ or ‘slow’, Neidjie does stress the need to listen carefully. In contrast the stupid ‘no-good man’ (who can be either Aboriginal or settler Australian) is described as ‘feeling something else’ (102), that is, something that blocks feeling, or is its antithesis.

From the perspective of the story about feeling, the essential coordinates that orientate human existence are the same everywhere. Neidjie describes the story about feeling as an ‘all over Australian story’ (78) and although he says he likes to camp outside to feel the wind and see the stars (p. 16), he takes into account the often, quite different, life situations of his audience:

This story e can listen carefully, e can listen slow.
If you in city well I suppose lot of houses,
You can't hardly look this star
but might be one night you look.
Have a look star because that's the feeling.
String [which appears to refer to energy meridians], blood...through your body. (3)

Notwithstanding light pollution and smog, gazing on the night sky from the backyard of an inner-city terrace or from the balcony of a high-rise apartment can potentially call forth feeling just as much as sitting under the night sky in the Kakadu National Park.

Neidjie's confidence in the universality and relevance of the story about feeling would be misplaced if it were not accompanied by an equal certainty of the fundamental unity of humanity. The accidents of place or origin/nationality and appearance are discarded by Neidjie in favour of more profound categories that establish each person, in the first instance, as human, not qualified by race or place of origin:

We say we don't like each other.
Ahh...no good we don't like each other. What for?
E not from somewhere else! (166)

The point being made here is that all humanity is of this earth, 'not from somewhere else'. Countries, or places of origin, are of secondary importance. In the 1985 text *Kakadu Man* Neidjie takes another approach and stresses the biological unity of humankind in the following lines:

Skin can be different,
but blood same.
Blood and bone....
all same.
Man can't split himself. (Neidjie *et al* 1985: 37, 70)

The natural world itself expresses openness and non-partisanship, and in the following beautiful phrases Neidjie makes it clear that the structure is not an abstract concept but another example of the intercorporeal intersubjectivity he believes in:

Sky...
this cloud for us.
Your story, my story.

Yes anybody can see cloud
because e bring new water,
making more new water for us. (58)

Many of the characteristics of Neidjie's discourse are present here: the continual reference to 'us', and when anything individual or personal is mentioned the immediate recognition of the same quality in the other, as in 'Your story/my story'.

Neidjie further universalises aspects of the Aboriginal sacred by telling the story in kriol; with an acute poetic sense he chooses to extend the potentialities of kriol rather than use the encyclopaedic and place-specific language of the Bunitj. Kriol is integral to Neidjie's telling of the story about feeling because, while lacking the exactitude of standard English (and other formal languages), it is in contrast neither ethno-centric, 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. This simple but refined linguistic economy is perfectly adequated to the task of representing the reciprocal and transparent interrelationships of birds, animals, humans, trees, and ancestral beings:

Listen carefully, careful
 and this spirit e come in your feeling
 And you will feel it...anyone that.
 I feel it...my body same as you.
 I telling you this because the land for us,
 never change round, never change.
 Places for us, earth for us,
 star, moon, tree, animal,
 no-matter what sort of animal, bird or snake...
 all that animal same like us. Our friend that. (19)

Having attempted to draw out the culturally unique aspects and major themes of *Story About Feeling* I will conclude with a summary discussion of modernity, given that in my opening paragraphs I suggested that it was in response to the challenge of modernity that a narrative such as *Story About Feeling* appeared. Alasdair Macintyre has defined the human subject of modernity as an ‘individual moral agent, freed from hierarchy and teleology, [who] conceives of himself and is conceived of by moral philosophers as sovereign in his moral authority’ (75). This freedom has its own risks. In his discussion of Heidegger, Gillespie defines modernity as the realm of freedom and subjectivity—but also the realm of objectivity and objectification: hence science and eugenics, industrialisation, secularism, and bureaucracy. Accordingly, man is both a subject and object and is always in danger of being enslaved. Gillespie’s summation is: ‘Modernity, which begins in freedom, and the promise of science, thus ends in nihilism, in world technology, totalitarianism, and total war’ (133). Heidegger himself writes that “‘because God is dead,” only man himself can grant man his measure and centre, the “type”, the “model” of a certain kind of man who has assigned the task of a revaluation of all values to the individual power of his will to power and who is prepared to embark on the absolute domination of the globe’ (Beistegui 1998: 74).

In thinking through the implications of the foregoing in an Australian context, we are fortunate in being able to draw on Deborah Bird Rose’s sustained work on the intersection of tradition and modernity. Rose writes: ‘Looking to the practices of time that underlie the making of new worlds, I find a regime of violence, a neutralisation of moral action and a bruising indifference toward pain. Settler societies are brought into being through invasion: death and silence pervade and gird the whole project’ (Rose 2004: 58). In her seminal work *Dingo Makes Us Human*, Rose quotes Jimmy Manngayarri and Hobbles Danayari, two senior men from Victoria River Valley in the Northern Territory, who frame their analysis of modernity and its effects in Aboriginal terms, drawing on post-contact history. Hobbles Danayari states:

Everything come up out of ground—language, people,
 emu, kangaroo, grass. That’s Law. Missionary just trying to bust
 everything up. They fuck ‘em up right through. Gonna end up in a big war.
 Before, everything been good - no war, no missionary. (Rose 1992: 57)

In Jimmy Manngayarri’s narration, instead of the settler saying to the Aboriginals, ‘Oh, come on mate, you and me living together, mates together’, sharing and exchanging, the settler decides to ‘clean the [Aboriginal] people out ... from their own country’ (194).

Given the force of these statements it might seem surprising that, after mocking the myth of the privileged Aboriginal receiving government handouts and making it clear that ‘Aborigine

had chain in the neck first go' (a reference to the infamous neck chains used on Aboriginal prisoners), Neidjie changes direction with a reference to the victimhood of settlers themselves:

But what about White-European they coming in this world? [Australia]
 What about that chain in the leg?
 They row...long chain everyone of them.
 Same thing. They was prisoner too! (164)

This passage brings to mind the convicts of the First Fleet in chains, and rowing longboats. But another reading might return to Gillespie's discussion of modernity and see settler Australians as trapped within and subject to the same systems of domination and violence they impose on Aboriginals. Neidjie's apparent transcendence of politics, it seems to me, is a question of emphasis. *Story About Feeling* contains an incisive discussion of mining in Kakadu; the negotiations, bordering on harassment, by the mining company, and the blandishments they used to gain Aboriginal consent (145-61). While the focus of elders such as Neidjie and Paddy Roe is on an essential, non-partisan knowledge, this is not a declaration that history is unimportant or that the violence of colonisation doesn't matter. In the magnum opus of the Ngarinyin, *Gwion Gwion: Secret and Sacred Pathways of the Ngarinyin Aboriginal people of Australia* (2000), Ngarjno, one of the Ngarinyin law people featured in that text, acknowledged the bloodshed that attended European settlement but wanted the spiritual and philosophical aspects of Ngarinyin culture to be the central focus of *Gwion Gwion*. Ngarjno goes so far as to identify accounts of settler violence as the property of settlers. This is an intellectually radical move that identifies the violence, and its subsequent representation by historians, as manifestations of an alien, non-indigenous epistemology. (To emphasise the fact that I'm referring to the country, not Aboriginal people, I deliberately do not capitalise indigenous here.)

Having thought about the politics of domination, violence and symbolic violence that flow from modernity, let us conclude this section with some consideration of the self produced within modernity. Here I use as an example Stephen Dedalus, the protagonist of James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. To console himself, Dedalus recalls lines from Shelley's poem, 'Art Thou Pale For Weariness' (sometimes known as 'To the Moon'):

Art thou pale for weariness
 Of climbing heaven and gazing on the earth,
 Wandering companionless...?

The novel writes: 'He repeated to himself the lines of Shelley's fragment. Its alternation of sad human ineffectiveness with vast inhuman cycles of activity chilled him and he forgot his own human and ineffectual grieving' (109).

Even as contemporary Western societies individualise their citizens—demanding maximum exercise of the will, encouraging a corporate version of personal resilience, and enforcing self-responsibility—Neidjie reminds us that essential processes in the natural order proceed without our volition. Trees and stars are described as 'working' while we sleep and dream. And as we sleep, 'blood e pumping' (3). Similar principles of balance are enacted in the natural world. Flying foxes feed on blossoms until dawn, when bees begin to collect pollen from the same blossoms (12).

In contrast to 'Art Thou Pale For Weariness', Neidjie outlines a schema that makes the long duration, the eviternity, of the stars as natural and reassuring as the cycle of death and rebirth for 'living' beings:

E'll be there million, million...star.
 Because e stay, e never move.
 Tree e follow you'n'me,
 e'll be dead behind us but next one e'll come.
 Same people. Aborigine same.
 We'll be dead but next one, kid, e'll be born.
 Same this tree.

Star e'll stay for ever and ever. (4)

In Neidjie's philosophy, with its acknowledgement of diverse and sometimes novel subjectivities, the simple binaries of alive and dead or animate/inanimate are grossly inadequate for representing or understanding existence. While Dedalus was consoled by those 'vastly inhuman cycles of activity' that put his own limited existence into perspective, Neidjie's narrative does not diminish the human or isolate the individual. Neidjie's form of intersubjectivity (not monism) becomes a connecting and unifying principle operating across all degrees of existence.

In this concluding section I shall be guided by Ngarjno and return to some of the essential qualities of *Story About Feeling* and Neidjie himself. In the narrative titled 'Spirit', Neidjie tells the story of the ancestral being Jabiru (Badbanarrwarr). The narration includes these remarkable lines:

You cannot see.
 I cannot see but you feel it.
 I feel it.
 E [Badbanarrwarr] can feeling.
 I feeling. (112)

The narrative goes on to say:

You listen my story and you will feel im
 because spirit e'll be with you.
 You cannot see but e'll be with you and e'll be with me.
 This story just listen careful. (115)

Neidjie says, with all conviction, that there is the possibility that the auditor/reader might be contacted by Badbanarrwarr, who can leave a material token of his visit:

Your dream is real because your spirit is true.
 And something e might drop im to you.
 E might give you something. (108)

And:

I love it too.

Is true...e can give you ease cause e longside you with this story
I'm telling you but e longside you. (109)

The narrative of Badbanarrwarr is made more beautiful by the consistent refinement and sensitivity of Neidjie's language with respect to birds, trees, animals. We realise that Neidjie is in state of consistent awareness of the mutual com-passion in play between all the orders of being; a state comparable to the neo-platonist concept of eros (Remes 2008) or the sufi concept of ishq (Lumbar 2007):

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 wind e love, love, love...
I love wind.
E blowing...nice country in the plain. (4)

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