

## **Tapestries of Poison (Towards Nurture Writing)**

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Mununjali People

nyannum

Cuz and I are talking about how our ancestors used poison to score a feed. I have questions about nyannum. How do you poison a fish and not be affected when you eat it? Wouldn't it make you sick? Stun sometimes, not kill, Cuz says, and sometimes things are left to rise, to sit in the water for a while so that toxins are released. We both getting hungry, sitting by the water, talking about fish. Nyannum contains poison that only affects fish. Stunned in a small rock pool. Perfect for a grab bag. Nyannum leaves are heart-shaped and shiny. Fish also stunned in a trap. Our people are known for making beautiful traps. Our architecture is destroyed for other architecture. A light rail takes precedence over the ancient traps that have been there for thousands of years. Under neo-colonial rule, they can't both co-exist. The ghosts surface in the new city.

Is nature writing a white-settler literature? Perhaps you would think so if you browsed the genre. It is only recently we've seen First Nations names come up in discussions of the Australian canonistic spectrum of nature writing, environmental literature and ecopoetics. A few names, cherrypicked to be on reading lists and citations. This inclusion seems to be a tokenistic gesture rather than a recognition of sovereignty, or a reading and writing ... and storytelling ... and a knowing ... that has always been present.

Colonial lies have destroyed a very fragile ecosystem, Yamaji writer and art curator Stephen Gilchrist says. Colonial misinformation whitewashes crimes of the past

committed by settlers. Literature is a valuable part of any colonial project. Vital to this colonial project is the fiction of terra nullius (land legally deemed to be unoccupied or uninhabited) and the fictions of conquest. The white supremacist view that settlers know more about the land and waters than Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and are more deserving to benefit from the wealth of these places still holds weight in settler literature today. What would blackfellas know about nature?

#### arsenic

In the 1800s, the settlers got their hands on poisons for agricultural purposes, and soon used them for killing blackfellas, lacing flour and damper with arsenic, strychnine, prussic acid and others. They sought to control the blacks just like they did the native plants and animals; they were encouraged to. I have a persistent memory of being in a writers' room, on a TV drama I had no passion for. I was young and naïve, and this offered 'a foot in the door' to one day writing my own show. The series was a late 1880s historical drama in the style of *The Secret River*. The scene we were workshopping involved a poisoning. The scene was being pulled apart and tossed around at a rate I couldn't keep up with until the other blackfella in the room said, 'Why don't we get the Aboriginal character to hand out the laced flour to the mob?' and the room breathed, 'That's too much! That's so wrong ... but so right.' And I was left floating somewhere, I don't know where. I was discombobulated – my body had left the building. Blinking away tears, I thought, what's wrong with you, you're too soft, you're too sensitive, it's just a TV show, an unwritten one at that, and these are just characters. But the betrayal felt personal. There was pressure to out-shock each other with our

ideas. I went to the bathroom to hide. I was not going to write brutality. The violence had already slashed my hands. I quit before I could contribute to the treatment of these characters and I ignored the follow-up phone calls. I was living between life and death and an old white male voice was saying in my head, 'You're not cut out for show business, sweetheart'. I did not want to recreate murder. I had my people's dignity somewhere, and I did not want them to die again, not for shock value, not for edginess or whatever this story factory was trying to manufacture. The politics of imagining colonial landscapes when there were real inheritors of trauma on Country kept me up at night. Some people saw this as a stepping stone, for others it was a quick way to kill a big mob of people.

Underneath each acknowledgement of Country is the pain that most First Nations people do not have legal recognition of their connection to their land and are denied access to their Country. This is at the heart of the black-green conflict, an unequal power dynamic and a difference in value systems about how to look after Country. We might disagree on what is 'sustainable' or 'sustainably sourced'. We may have different cultural worldviews on ownership and property. We may have lores and laws that govern our relationships to water, earth, sky, plants and animals that have been historically oppressed and repressed. This contributes to the space we call nature writing, ecopoetics and environmental literature. First Nations knowledges of Country don't fit the Western definition of knowledge. First Nations writing, as decolonial writing, does not fit easily into preconceived notions of what nature writing is.

Acceptance into the nature writing club is conditional. These critical literary spaces can, from observation, be quite harmful for First Nations people writing in an anti-colonial way. First Nations writers are constantly being asked to prove their 'authenticity' and at the same time their 'credentials'. Some settler writers go to great lengths to say they are

‘right’ to defend the pillars of the genre and some of its colonial figures, and the First Nations writer is ‘wrong’.

I recently watched the 2022 *Four Corners* special on the brumbies culture wars on Ngarigo and Djiringanj land, which so clearly shows the impact a singular poem, Paterson’s ‘The Man from Snowy River’, has on the Australian colonial mythology (‘feral’). The affective elements of the poem have been used by white Australians in the present day to justify horrific acts of violence and intimidation. The so-called ‘horse activists’ see the wild horses not as feral pests that destroy native ecosystems but heroic symbols of national heritage that must be protected above all else. The brumbies represent an idea that settlers thrive on – they believe they are free to do what they wish and do not have to respect the fact they are on Indigenous land. It’s a microcosm of the war against Country going on across this continent. Colonists are not heroic adventurers that settled uninhabited new land; they are plunderers and destroyers and thieves.

When I think of the British colonists I think of their strategies of deceit. The archetypal assassin wears a cloak to hide his identity or remain hidden from view and to obscure the presence or movement of the dagger. The British colonist is this figure, a vial of poison in the waistcoat.

The original deceitful act was to improperly apply the legal concept of terra nullius to Australia, disregarding First Nations presence and belonging to land, and regarding the land as empty for the taking without the need for a treaty. In 1770, Cook landed on Eora land and was greeted by Eora people, whom he and his party shot at, wounding one. After a few days there, he sailed up the coast to Bedhan Lag, one of the southernmost Torres Strait Islands, belonging to the Kaurareg people, which he renamed Possession Island, as this was where he claimed possession of the eastern coast of Australia on behalf of King George III.

The British colonists deliberately did not use any of the three ‘legal’ pathways to possession. They acted as if Australia was uninhabited. And yet they stole and murdered in arrogance. In Cook’s words, the First Nations people he dispossessed were ‘uncivilised inhabitants in a primitive state of society’ and Country was ‘desert and uncultivated’. They

justified the Invasion by deeming First Nations people non-human beings. Eighteen years later the continent was claimed as a British penal settlement.

Deceit was in the weapons of biological warfare used, as the British soon figured out First Nations people had little immunity to their diseases. Smallpox was strategically passed on through innocent-looking items such as blankets, which were exchanged. Huge numbers of First Nations people lost their lives in the smallpox pandemic. Their deaths were seen by the colonists as deserving, as if it was meant to happen, a cleansing of the new land. Biological warfare was seen as justified.

In the 1820s, colonialists brought in the use of strong poisons to kill dingoes believed to be of threat to their sheep. Poisons were cheap and mandated by the state. The invaders used these poisons to massacre First Nations peoples. Mass poisoning events took place throughout the continent. These are just some examples, and no convictions against the perpetrators have been ever been made: 1824, Bathurst, members of the Wiradjuri peoples are poisoned with arsenic-infused damper; 1833, Gangat, British give large number of First Nations people poisoned flour in three separate incidents, killing them; 1846, Whiteside (sixteen kilometres from my house), at least three First Nations people are killed by arsenic-laced flour being placed out; 1856, Hornet Bank, a number of First Nations people are killed by eating strychnine-laced Christmas puddings they were given, in the lead-up to the Hornet Bank massacre; 1885, Florida cattle station, Yolŋu people become ill and die after being given poisoned horse meat; 1895, Fernmount, six First Nations people are poisoned to death after being given aconite to drink by John Kelly. Poisoning was premeditated murder, seen as easier and more effective than killing by gun or other weapons.

#### bayoo

These seeds are beautiful red, as captivating as embers from a fire. First Nations people have complex methods of detoxification. Soaking; leaching the toxins out in water. Burning. Burying and leaving in pits for months. Salting. Fermenting in a specially made bag. These methods were used to harvest and process bayoo by the Noongar

people. When the seeds were eaten by invading Europeans, they got very sick. De Vlamingh, the Dutch botanist, and his crew poisoned themselves eating what is for First Nations people a rich food source. It is not just transforming the inedible into the edible, it's changing the poisonous into the nourishing. The reward overtakes the risk.

Is it useful to expand the definition of nature writing to include us? Certainly settler writer Kelsey Allen is right when she says, 'There is no environmental literature without Indigenous authors'. Why does society still see white writers as the experts in nature?

In recent times, other non-white racialised communities have argued for their writing to be seen as nature writing, to expand the authorship (and perhaps readership) of nature writing. I think here of the anthology *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry* (2009) edited by Camille T Dungy, which is the first and largest collection of African American nature poetry published. This anthology came out of the anti-Black exclusion of African Americans from nature poetry. This can't be easily compared to First Nations literature, as African Americans are not Indigenous to the land. They are not settlers either. Although they are beneficiaries of the colonisation of Turtle Island, they are descendants of forcibly displaced Africans. This exclusion Dungy addresses is an anti-Black exclusion rather than an anti-Indigenous exclusion.

I am not interested in how non-Indigenous Australians write about connection to landscape and place. This is not my area of interest. I am however interested in supporting and facilitating the voices of First Nations writers and modes of writing with Country that do not attempt to strip the voice of the land.

Some First Nations writers do not want to be seen as nature writers – it's an individual preference and they have their own reasons. Many writers are against classification altogether. We deserve to call our writing whatever we want to. I can't be so sure that, say, the late great Aunty Oodgeroo Noonuccal, who wrote often of nature, would want to be seen as a nature writer. I would love the opportunity to ask her. They say all roads are old roads created by First Nations people, already worn and measured and steadied.

Noonuccal's work embodies how we as First Nations people read and write Country and have been doing so for thousands of years. Reading trees, for example, as Victor Steffensen writes about in *Fire Country*.

First Nations people don't have a separate word for nature in our many languages. I am not aware either of any First Nations words for such things as environment or ecology, because it is all Country, which cannot be compartmentalised or labelled beyond what it is. In Indigenous worldviews, the concept of nature is a foreign one, a separation, separating ourselves from the environment we are related to. We see everything as connected.

I think of Kumeyaay writer Tommy Pico's book-length longform poem, *Nature Poem*. Through a satirical lens, Tommy writes about his aversion to writing a poem about 'nature' – that's because for Tommy, 'nature' represents something that conflicts with his Kumeyaay heritage. The concept of nature has been cruel to Native people, Tommy's work says. Social justice has been wrongfully related to nature, Tommy argues, while there is no justice for Native people. This is where the environmental white middle-class construction of pristine wilderness is exposed for its violence: see Germaine Greer's *White Beech*.

'I can't write about nature,' Ballardong Noongar writer Timmah Ball says, echoing Pico. It reads as a confession, but it is a purposeful refusal. Timmah writes about the dugai consumption of nature, which sits in discomfort with her people's displacement off Country. She explains how the embedded networks in Country that are vital to our survival are rendered invisible by settlers.

To include First Nations writers in the genre of nature writing, we must ask, who is doing the classification? And for whose benefit? Who is doing the seeing, and the knowing?

bufotoxin

Every night I hear the cane toad in the backyard. I rush downstairs, to check on Marta. I see her against the wall – her and the cane toad are staring each other down. Have I got there in time? Has contact been made? I open her

mouth for signs of poison. The last few nights I've been distracted by the tennis and it's wet, very moist. She does not know – like I do – not to touch the toad. Its surface. There's a cricket bat somewhere in the shed – but I can't bring myself to kill it. Instead I have to listen to it – a sound that's been here for seventy-three years. Marta as a border collie is obsessive, wants to hunt it every night, wants to find it, no matter where it is. I take her for supervised bathroom breaks with the torch shining. How do I teach her about poison? I think I saw her touch the toad. I watch her for signs of nausea and confusion. I see seven toads on my nightly walks with her – they are 98 per cent more densely populated in north-eastern Australia than they are in their native South America. Vague sensory childhood memory of kicking or imagining I was kicking with steel-capped boots. It's dark in our yard and there's no moonlight. The yard backs onto bush, creek, long grass; it's moist after a storm. The toad's skin bulges. When attacked, toads sits back and let it happen; a learnt pattern as they know their weapon is their skin. It's been written a thousand times before but this animal is invasive, its spotted skin, its breath. It connects to a colonial history from Jamacia: sugar, slavery and destruction. It's not the toad's fault it has been made an invader. It wasn't very good at catching the native cane beetle – it couldn't climb or jump in the cane fields. The sugarcane and then the cane toad were uninvited and unwelcome guests to Country. A so-called 'biocontrol' attempt. The toad's sound is familiar, almost as familiar as rain, as I contemplate the Indigenous uses for toad poison in South America, and how crows here have learnt to flip them on their back to feed from their underbelly. Maybe there's hope in how quolls (who became locally extinct after the introduction of toads) can,



through humans, be taught to avoid the species, I think, as I open Marta's mouth again.

I am not the first person to try to detach from nature writing's colonial implications. The Chicana writer Priscilla Solis Ybarra calls a grouping of Chincanx decolonial environmental writing 'goodlife writing' in her book *Writing the Goodlife: Mexican American Literature and the Environment*. There is a need to name our writing in ways that fully encapsulate where our writing is coming from.

Perhaps what I'm saying here is that I don't mind being called a nature writer, but it is not the way I identify myself, and I find alternative self-governing, self-sovereign terms more useful. I'm moving towards understanding myself as a nurture writer. It's a term that feels more appropriate for my own writing, and certainly other First Nations writers can use it as well, if they feel it is the right fit for them. It is situated in the active. Nurture is a doing word.

To make this distinction reminds me of Yuin designer Alison Page saying First Nations architecture is a verb, a doing, not a noun. Our cultures are active; our culture activates Country.

Nurture writing is writing that nurtures, that has nurturing in its essence. Nurture writing is a state of mind, an act of sovereignty and a form of resistance.

Is it useful to compile and weave a personal list – of course inexhaustive and still growing – of First Nations-authored writing that could fit into this camp? I do so here:

Oodgeroo Noonuccal 'Reed Flute Cave'

Kirli Saunders *Bindi*      Victor Steffensen *Fire Country*      Warumpi Band 'Waru'

Jeanine Leane 'Native Grasses'      John Mucky Burke 'Point of View'

Sandra Phillips 'Walking While Aboriginal'

Tony Birch 'How Water Works'

Luke Patterson 'Authority of Creeks'

Lisa Bellea 'Beautiful

Yuroke Red River Gum' Samuel Wagan Watson 'Brown Water Looting' Jenny Fraser (ed)

Plant Power Sisterhood Evelyn Araluen 'Snugglepot and Cuddlepie in the Ghost Gum'

Alexis Wright *Tracker* Jason de Santolo 'Sun Showers and White Ochre'

Charmaine Papertalk Green 'Walgajunmanha All Time'

Ali Cobby Eckerman *Inside My*

*Mother*

David Unaipon 'The Voice of the Great Spirit'

Patsy Cameron *Grease and Ochre*

Oral stories of Aunty Dawn Daylight

From 1837, the government forcefully bribed First Nations people to join the Native Police, taking them away from their communities and culture in exchange for food, money, housing and gifts. Our people received few hints that they would be required to track, battle and kill other First Nations people. For the British, it was a cost-effective military weapon that further aided in expanding the colony and killing off and dispossessing First Nations people.

White men and white women collaborated to commit rape against First Nations women and girls to display power and dominance. The growing number of children born with a Black mother and white father, and of a lighter skin tone, was to the white supremacists a 'problem', but one that could be solved through state-sectioned processes of 'assimilation'.

From the start of the twentieth century, based on the corrupt assumption that it would be for their own good, First Nations children were separated, often from birth, from their mothers and families. The aim of this was to break kinship connections, end First Nations culture and meet demand for station workers and domestic servants. First Nations workers were often unpaid and overworked, their slave labour bolstering the economy. Authorities used the false guise of pretending First Nations parents were neglecting their children. At hospitals, babies were hidden from their mothers under blankets by cooperating nurses, taken far away, stripped of names and given numbers instead.

Deceit continued in the dark cloud that blew up over Maralinga, the traditional lands of the Maralinga Tjarutja of the southern Pitjantjatjara peoples in the 1950s. The Australian government knew enough about the potential effects of the blast to consider postponing the Melbourne Olympics, hundreds of kilometres from the site. Yet they agreed to the

British nuclear testing that killed and made ill hundreds of First Nations people, leaving the community with poisoned land and health effects for generations to come. 'People thought it was a wanampi, the serpent snake coming out and getting angry, but it was actually a mushroom cloud,' Elder Jeremy Lebois said, illustrating Anangu people were not warned about the test's dangers.

I could go on, but you have probably got the point. Nothing's fair in this country, which prides itself on false values of sportsmanship and mateship. First Nations people continue to get screwed over all the time, whether it's Juukan Gorge, or Dja Dja Wurrung trees. White people change the rules to suit themselves.

#### plutonium

Knocking softly on Yhonnie Scarce's door in Wurundjeri country to interview her for the newspaper. As nervous as expected when meeting one of my favourite artists. She lets me in and I have a cuppa with her and her two nieces. We stop and think about how acid rain travelled from Yhonnie's Country as far as to my Mununjali Country in a big thick cloud. Of what had been concealed but at the same time was in the air, everywhere. The 1950s and 1960s British atomic testing that set fire to Country. The nuclear blasts at Maralinga. The forced leaving of the Spinifex people. I think about ground zero and the mass poisoning event that continues. Of Yhonnie's poisoned glass yams and Ali Cobby Eckermann's poison-tinged poems. When I visit Japan I meet a teacher in Kumamoto who tells me my writing about Country reminds him of a friend of his, a woman warrior writer now gone, who wrote about the poisoned land and waters there. He urges me to keep going, for her. Yhonnie spends hours in the studio manipulating the hot glass with her hands and mouth. The beaks of the yams in the dead earth of the mass contamination event. Not being able to grow anything, life cut off. Children died, and the intergenerational health

effects continue. The cancers spread. The clean-up botched. How long will it take to break down the toxins in the earth? It may never stop. The ground is radioactive. No new shoots here, no growth. The genocidal-ecocidal mindset of not caring about mob and their land has not been broken, yet. Yhonnie sees me admiring (strange to admire, but I can't think of a verb that carries both admiration and fear) a yam and gives it to me as a gift. In the hand-blown forms there is violence and beauty. It sits on my desk while I write.

Pick your poison; Australia is known to be the deadliest place in the world, and that's not in the Irish colloquialism adopted into Aboriginal English. The continent contains some of the most poisonous plants, like the gympie-gympie, the stinging bush named by the Gubbi Gubbi people. The venom is described as scorpion-like and it's been claimed as the world's most dangerous plant; very fine brittle hairs loaded with toxins cover the whole plant and paralyse. Horses who come into contact with the plant have to be shot because they experience so much pain, though flying foxes camp in the branches, and First Nations people extract the hairs to use as an acupuncture-like treatment for arthritis.

We also have most of the world's top tier of venomous snakes. The 140 snake and 30 sea snake species we have today are all descended from one common ancestor, so they've learnt to outcompete each other in the environment. They had strong evolutionary pressure to elevate the levels of venom in their fangs.

So many poisons, and so many uses, on this beautiful continent like no other. The Sydney funnel-web spider can kill a human in an hour. Its K'gari version is known by Butchulla people as 'mudjar nhiling guran', meaning 'long-toothed spider'. Scientists originally captured the spiders from this location due to their contrast – black against white sand – making them easier to spot. Its venom is even more dangerous and complex than that of the funnel-web. Only a handful of the 3000 peptide molecules are lethal, while some of the others have medical uses. Researchers have discovered one molecule with great potential to treat stroke and heart attack and prolong the storage time of donor hearts for transplant. Snake venom also is increasingly recognised for its medicinal qualities.

Jellyfish, meanwhile, have more than 800,000 stinging organelles per square centimetre on their tentacles, which can only be seen under a microscope.

We often use the word ‘toxic’ as a shorthand to describe social spaces that are not conducive to health and wellbeing, where things have become out of balance; where something has gone wrong, and efforts to alchemise the space have not helped. My cuz says she had to leave a blackfella Facebook group because it was ‘toxic’. I notice we as blackfellas use this adjective a lot to describe unhealthy situations. We know that sometimes it’s safer to disengage and disentangle. Of course, this is more complicated when it is our own families and our own Country. This requires complex responses, with care for ourselves and our legacy.

Ever walked into a room and known you had to leave? Ever felt like the walls were making you sick? What are the first signs that you are being poisoned? Behavioural changes. Loss of appetite. Feeling dizzy, drowsy and tired. A headache that spreads. Rapid heart rate. High blood pressure. Skin changes. Is it a slow poisoning or has it already happened? Is it already too late to reverse the effects?

#### anticoagulant

The anticoagulant is an important chemical in the world of medicine. It is also used to kill. Blood-thinning rat poison is designed so the rat comes back to its location over three days to get more and more poison until they die. Wedge-tailed eagles, masked owls, boobook owls and goannas eat the rats, get the secondary poison and die. Goanna is an important food source for some First Nations people, meaning they risk their health if they continue eating this cultural food. The poison has made a network that is widespread. I live under my parents’ house, a tiled room, and my dad wanted to do some pest control. He wasn’t going to go with a safe option. I left the house for the morning and

went to do some work at the library. When I came home the poison had been sealed under the gaps in the tiles. I had a blinding headache and a sore throat. I vomited the first few days. My dad says I'm just sensitive. I slept upstairs on the couch. I couldn't work in my bedroom. Maybe we are all living with the sickness. It's in our beds. It's in our heads. It's in our blood.

Yamaji poet Charmaine Papertalk Green writes collaboratively with dugai Anglo-Celtic poet John Kinsella about the destructive effects of mining on her Country in mid-west Western Australia, and the residue of past wrongs in *False Claims of Colonial Thieves*. The 'colonial thieves' rob First Nations people and give permission for a legacy of destruction in the mining state of Australia. The book shows how agriculture and mining by-products directly and indirectly poison the land and the people. Mining poisons the water. Bores in the region are contaminated with arsenic, uranium and nitrates. Unsafe levels of heavy metals and nitrates cause chronic illness and early onset kidney disease in adults and sick babies. Where is the explicit consent to poison Country?

On Latje Latje land, on Barkindji land, on Dharug land, on many different lands, dead fish line the surface of the rivers. Lorikeets die from drinking from suburban-backyard bird baths. Sea eagles die from pesticides used on bananas. Once nutritious cultural foods have changed their properties and slowly start to kill. Can we take the harness off the land and just breathe?

Toxicity needs to be removed from the earth, water, sky and people. We need to be detoxified and restored to balance. Poison has its use, when used well, when targeted. Blackfellas know poison can be beautiful too, like the nyannum. Poison can sustain us when it's woven right, made proppa. The mode of creation of the harvesting basket and fermentation bag inspires the metaphor for the mode in which First Nations writers write. We have to know how to treat these plants and animals for them to treat us well, to nurture us, in return.

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