Arboreal Being: Encounters with Trees in Recent Southern African Fiction

Wendy Woodward

Summary

Because trees tend to be objectified, labelled botanically without any awareness of the import of their presence, the novels and short story considered in this article are unusual. Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness* (2000), Niq Mhlongo's *Soweto, Under the Apricot Tree* (2018), Mia Couto's *Under the Frangipani* (2001) and Beverley Rycroft's *A Slim Green Silence* (2015) foreground the presence of trees in their narratives, all implicitly critiquing a "culture" which neglects to acknowledge a tree in its full significance. In *The Heart of Redness,* Zim merges with ancestral time via his beloved fig tree. The title short story in *Soweto, Under the Apricot Tree* depicts the eponymous tree as both a material participant in apartheid history as well as a link to indigenous beliefs. In *Under the Frangipani,* Mucanga*,* the main character, attains his desired oblivion from the narrative self as he merges with "plant life". Yellowwoods feature centrally in the awareness of Connie's spirit in *A Slim Green Silence.* Merging into arboreal being has ontological implications for the characters as well as a broader animist significance. At the same time, the trees are biopolitical subjects rooted in the temporal environment.

Opsomming

Aangesien bome, sonder die minste aandag aan die belang daarvan, summier geobjektiveer en botanies benoem word, is die romans en kortverhaal waaroor hierdie artikel handel, in vele opsigte merkwaardig. In Zakes Mda se roman *The Heart of Redness* (2000), Niq Mhlongo se kortverhaalbundel *Soweto, Under the Apricot Tree* (2018), Mia Couto se roman *Under the Frangipani* (2001) en Beverley Rycroft se *A Slim Green Silence* (2015) tree bome op die voorgrond as implisiete kritiek teen 'n "kultuur" waarin die belang van bome onderskat word. In *The Heart of Redness* reis Zim deur sy dierbare vyeboom terug na die tyd waarin sy voorouers geleef het. Die gelyknamige boom in die titelkortverhaal in *Soweto, Under the Apricot Tree* tree gelyktydig as 'n wesenlike deelnemer aan die apartheidsgeskiedenis en 'n band met inheemse opvattings op. In *Under the Frangipani* ontkom die hoofkarakter Mucanga aan die narratiewe self wanneer hy in die "plantlewe" opgeneem word. Geelhoutbome speel in die roman *A Slim Green Silence* 'n wesenlike rol in die bewussyn van Connie se gees. Eenwording met 'n arboriese wese hou ontologiese implikasies vir die karakters in, en het ook nog 'n breë animistiese strekking. Bome is terselfdertyd biopolitiese subjekte wat in 'n aardse omgewing gewortel is.

JLS/TLW 35(4), Dec./Des. 2019
ISSN 0256-4718/Online 1753-5387
© *JLS/TLW*
DOI: 10.1080/02564718.2019.1690808

Introduction

In the mid-1970s when I was living in Southern California, I took a course in herbology with a shirtless, emaciated hippy who starved himself the better to test the effects of remedies from indigenous plants. We spent hours communicating with trees, our arms hovering over branches to feel their growing. I was never sure if it was their life force I was sensing or my own – manifesting in pins and needles in my tired hands. Today I notice that the poplars on the Alphen trail in my neighbourhood have been ring-barked. Their dying, slowly, and I can only imagine, excruciatingly, hurts me. Too close to the Diep River which is throttled by bamboo and sewage downstream, they have been sacrificed to politically correct rigidities about alien vegetation. No sensitivity to established trees, no awareness of arboreal being intrudes in local policies. Yet current botanical research shows that trees are social beings communicating with their neighbours, sharing nutrients, suffering in isolation on city streets. Perhaps my connecting with trees cannot be consigned to the New Age or lunatic fringe after all. But how to convey such experiences? In Human-Animal Studies theories abound about trans-species engagements – via the gaze, compassion, a sense of embodied vulnerabilities, even shamanism. Trees are not, of course, mammalian. Short of an Ovidian metamorphosis such as that of Daphne transformed into a laurel tree "here in my wooden legs and O/ my green green hands" (Sexton 1981: 18), our more usual creaturely connections with arboreal beings are, perhaps, more challenging to convey.

In *Through Vegetal Being* Luce Irigaray notes the customary objectification of trees: "Our culture taught us meeting a tree only through a denomination, an idea, a use, or a "face" of the tree that does not move" (Irigaray & Marder 2016: 46). She suggests, instead, that we need to "build bridges between our bodily and cultural belonging" and that we circumvent the mediation of our senses

> through paying attention, in the present, to its concrete singularity and its sensible qualities … [so] that the perception of a thing, above all of a living being, can lead us from a merely physical stage to a spiritual stage.
> (47)

The novels discussed in this article, Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness* (2000), Niq Mhlongo's *Soweto, Under the Apricot Tree* (2018), Mia Couto's *Under the Frangipani* (2001) and Beverley Rycroft's *A Slim Green Silence* (2015) implicitly critique a "culture" which classifies a tree botanically rather than appreciating it spiritually, with the death of a human or humans at the centre of interconnection with trees. The significance of human death in relation to trees varies in each novel as does the extent to which the dualism of the physical and the spiritual, as noted by Irigaray, is overcome.

Each novel imagines both a "growing-with" nature and a "falling apart" (Irigaray & Marder 2016: 177). "The bond of the *with*" Marder suggests, "emerges from shared life, understood based on its vegetal determination as growth" (177). He cautions that a growing-with should be underpinned by independence otherwise what follows is "the trap of a fusion with the whole in which each is dissolved (almost) without a remainder" (177). Ralph Acampora is also critical of fusion in human-animal ethics regarding it as "romantic" or "erotogenic" (2006: 114) and a potential denial of the subjectivity of the non-human animal. He favours "complementary apprehension of separation" (115). In human-arboreal ethics, however, fusion or merging with trees may signify a spiritual porousness. The dissolving of what Plumwood calls the "continuing, narrative self" (n.d.: n.p.) into arboreal being may be figured as an organic process. In these southern African novels disintegration of the human may be another form of growing-with a tree as death is imagined as an inter-permeation. Such a process has profound ontological significance for the sense of a self which has been figured as separate from nature.

The Heart of Redness **and** ***Soweto, Under the Apricot Tree***

In *The Heart of Redness* (2000), Zakes Mda has a majestic, wild fig tree as a conduit to the ancestral milieu for the dying Zim, as though the impermanence of human lives may be contradicted by the relative stability and longevity of this tree especially, deemed sacred by many African societies (Mbiti 1969: 51). In the present-day narrative strand an ongoing feud divides descendants of the Believers and the Unbelievers – the former persuaded by Nongqawuse's prediction of the Cattle Killing in 1856-1857 which involved the slaughtering all cattle and the destruction of all crops in preparation for an apocalyptic day eradicating white settlers. Far from being benighted conservatives wishing to guard tradition at all costs, the Believers today nurture a strong ecological awareness of the flora at Qolorha-by-Sea, the small village they inhabit, and are committed to protecting regional "wildness". The Unbelievers, on the other hand, have fostered an alliance with developers who want to set up a local gambling complex.

Zim, patriarch of the Believers, lives beneath the massive wild fig tree over a hundred years old. In size it exceeds his hut with its branches "spreading wide like an umbrella over his whole homestead" (41) as it towers over the umsintsi trees and the aloes. For Zim the tree is his "confessional" and his "solace" (40) in its link with Twin, the particular ancestor who planted it, and in its connection with ancestors generally – those from the sea, the forest, the veld and the homestead – who are "all regular visitors to this tree" (41). In animist worldviews such as those of the Believers, trees, according to Malidoma Patrice Some in *The Healing Wisdom of Africa,* are our "guardians" manifesting "patient love and caring" as they "provide safety and

comfort" (1999: 259). These characteristics suggest not only that trees are agentive but that humans grow-with plants, which is the case with Zim and his daughter Qukezwa. That Zim communicates with his beloved tree attests to the "*personhood*" of the wild fig. In animism, as Matthew Hall notes, plants "as persons … are recognized as volitional, intelligent, relational, perceptive, and communicative beings" who exist in kinship relations with humans (2011: 100).

Zim has a closer relationship with the wild fig tree than with his fellow villagers and even his daughter. The beloved tree sustains him as he is dying, with the Amahobohobo weaverbirds, like musical messengers from the tree itself, pervading his hut with their song. Zim is happy to die, to become an ancestor (his rival Bhonco bitterly resents Zim dying before him as he will become firmly established in the Otherworld before Bhonco gets there). Becoming part of the temporality of the fig tree as he dies and is transformed into an ancestor, Zim merges with ancestral time. If plants and humans are usually "non-contemporaneous with each other" (Marder 2013: 104), in this animist instance Zim and the fig tree through their kinship and interconnection both come to exist in "vegetal temporality" (104).

The temporality of the eponymous apricot tree in Niq Mhlongo's *Soweto, Under the Apricot Tree* (2018), a collection of short stories, is linked on one level to apartheid history. The final short story, from which Mhlongo's collection takes its title, is set during a celebratory meal after the consecration of Uncle Tso's tombstone, when the extended family of Sipho, the narrator, feast beneath the said tree. According to his mother, fruit trees and grapevines were planted next to newly-built houses in Soweto by the apartheid authorities possibly, she surmises, "to fool us and make us believe that this place was better than where we used to live in Sophiatown, Western and elsewhere" (195). If the tree is synecdochic, dependent on apartheid policy for its very existence, it has partially overcome its provenance. Sipho's mother tells him that the tree is "sacred" and that all her children's umbilical cords are buried beneath it. Yet it only bears "one mysterious rotten apricot" annually (193) as if it carries a continuing taint of the apartheid regime. Ten Years, so-named after his prison sentence for murder, hanged himself from the tree in despair after his release and because of his unemployability, as though the tree with its apartheid beginnings demands a human sacrifice. During the celebration of the tombstone, the present rotten apricot falls eerily on his son.

Both sinister and sacred, imbricated in both tradition and apartheid inequities, the apricot tree is a witness to human life, even a guardian, as well as a material participant in human history, with its branch deployed for the act of suicide. At the same time, Sipho and his mother acknowledge the "'voice'" of the tree and its "plant presence" (162) and enact a "[r]espectful, moral relationship" (Hall 2011: 162) with it. The short story is brought to closure with the narrator musing on the tree:

> The wide branches of the tree sway slowly in the evening breeze … this tree has multiple souls that fill me with wonder every morning and enchant me by afternoon. This tree has bittersweet memories, just like the fruit it bears.
> (206-207)

In his growing-with the tree, the narrator has overcome any disquiet about the tree's beginnings or about its role in Ten Years' suicide, preferring to imagine it in terms of nature and spirituality. The wild fig and the apricot tree in Mda's and Mhlongo's narratives respectively are thus both situated within a biopolitical order which historicises their provenance; at the same time they both embody traditional spiritual connections.

Under the Frangipani

The eponymous tree in Mia Couto's novel *Under the Frangipani* (2001) is also a biopolitical subject with deep spiritual significance for the narrative selves of the geriatric characters. It is unclear how this frangipani tree came to be growing on the terrace of an old colonial fort in Mozambique; the frangipani itself is non-indigenous, an alien from Mexico or South America. The fort has shifted over the centuries from serving as a trading post, to defending the Portuguese, to imprisoning anti-Portuguese revolutionaries. After independence it became a "refuge" for old people, while the civil war raged elsewhere. The aged community are marooned in the fort because of the surrounding mines laid in postcolonial Mozambican conflicts. At the end of the novel the fort is apparently destroyed in an explosion of hidden arms and ammunition.

At the opening of the novel, the deceased Ermelindo Mucanga, who exists in limbo, "a dead man who couldn't find his death" (2), is in the process of being disinterred, dragged into the material world, to be reburied as a "national hero" (4). Disgusted at this prospect as he does not want to be alive given "the state [his] country is in" (7) his spirit guide, an anteater or *halakavuma*, directs him to enter the body of the policeman about to investigate the death of Vastsome Excellency previously in charge of the old age refuge. If he re-experiences his death and is correctly buried, Mucanga can progress to the realm of the ancestors rather than being a ghost, but in order to do so he has to transition as a *shipoco*, a night spirit, occupying another's body. Mucanga is the framing narrator whose continuing self is fractured by these different realms. The narrative of the novel shifts between his first person accounts as a *shipoco* inhabiting Inspector Izidine Naita, without him knowing it, and the confessions of the old people, each of whom claims to have killed Vastsome Excellency because each harbours a strong motive.

The "plant presence" of the tree is a forceful one, in spite of its physical fragility. The deceased Mucanga, lies beneath "a skinny little frangipani" (2).

He has been wrongly interred according to arboreally-informed tradition which requires burial near a substantial tree like a marula or a kapok with acacia shoots planted round the body, hunched in a sitting position. Mucanga, consequently, is variously, an "unlikely ancestor", (3) a "pre-ancestor" (11) and a homeless spirit. His engagement with the tree takes place in a liminal realm. If the dead "only dream on rainy nights" (3), Mucanga himself is "dreamt" by the tree. Not only is the tree granted narrative agency but the frangipani itself approximates an extradiegetic narrator.

Like Zim's wild fig tree, the frangipani tree is sacred; "*This is where the gods come to pray*" (11) the anteater reports. Mucanga's subterranean, literal growing-with the frangipani constitutes a relationship of spiritual and physical fusion. He feels that "[t]he tree and [he] were alike. Who had ever watered [their] roots? Both of [them] were creatures reared on the mist" (11). This fusion seems not to be a "trap" but a spiritual path for the discontinuous narrative self of a pre-ancestor. Mucanga's feelings about the frangipani approximate Marder's notion of "vegetal mindfulness". We humans can uncover our own mindfulness by learning from the "attention" of plants which is nonobjectifying; from the way they are "together with" the elements which they are close to and from their constant attention to the elements (Irigaray & Marder 2016: 158). Marder suggests that in order to "discover" such mindfulness "within ourselves" (158) that "we should look no further than our bodies' unconscious attention to the surroundings" (158). Mucanga's physical body may not still be intact, but, as a night spirit, he pays attention to the surroundings both consciously and unconsciously.

Strong feelings for the tree recur in the old timers' confessions, although they may not be as spiritually inclined as those of Mucanga. Sidimingo, the only white man at the refuge, celebrates being "engulfed by the perfume of its white flowers, with their yellow heart" (41). He may have been "de-portugoosed" (42) or decolonialised by his own admission, but he sees "race" in terms of trees and place. As Naita is black, Sidimingo judges that he will be unable to understand a European joy in a deciduous tree which marks the seasons by losing its leaves. In acknowledging his colonial roots, however, Sidimingo cites the legend of an old black man at the time of Vasco da Gama who "planted" a plank from a shipwreck which then grew into a tree. He tells the Inspector: "I'm that tree. I come from a plank in another world but my ground is here, my roots were reborn in this place" (42). The metaphor of his arboreal being suggests a postcolonial acknowledgement of being alien while harbouring feelings of belonging. Yet he cannot accept the "devastating vastness" (43) of the indigenous grassland, and sets fire to the bush, preferring "fire and ash" (43) to their "eternity" (43). In his desire for death he imagines the frangipani flowers inspiring his longing for infinity and arboreal being "[a]s if I were the one in flower" (46).

When Old Gaffer takes a cutlass to the frangipani tree Sidimingo retaliates. The two aged friends try to fight each other, then fall to the ground in

exhaustion and mirth. Couto has them compare their cultural beliefs about the frangipani. Sidimingo's appreciation of the frangipani is informed by animism: "The tree's immortal soul [is] the earth itself. When you touch its trunk you feel the earth's blood flowing round every vein in your body" (62). Here he takes his personal connection with the tree to a more extensive level as well as to an interpenetration of the earth's blood with his own body in an embodied, ecological spirituality. If animist beliefs are about relating (Hall 2011: 125) then Sidimingo's "fantasy" exemplifies such a relationship between human and tree. In Old Gaffer's myth about the origins of time at first only humans lived on the earth but when they became too numerous the gods turned some of them into plants, animals or stones – a story which further illustrates inter-relationship, with "all created out of the same matter" (64).

The novel ends in an explosion that is both real and dream-like. In the penultimate chapter entitled "The revelation" Little Miss No, rumoured to be a "witch," proves her powers and narrates the story of Vastsome Excellency's death. He had been stockpiling weapons left over from the war and was involved in the arms trade, but the old people, once apprised of his cache, were determined to get rid of the weapons concealed in the chapel. They did so by throwing them into a void, "the entrance to emptiness itself" (142) created by Little Miss No. When the arms dealers returned to find this lacuna, they shot Vastsome Excellency, blaming him. In the present, Mucanga, now detached from Inspector Naita, realises that his emotions have been inextricably bound up with the tree and that his heart had "reappear[ed] in every flowering of the frangipani" (145), but he is distracted as the *halakavuma* causes the world to explode into fire. The helicopter carrying the arms dealers, now intent on murdering Naita in case he has uncovered their crimes, burns, crashing into the fort and setting off an explosion of such magnitude "it was as if the whole world had been set ablaze" (147). As Little Miss No ushers everyone back to the fort the ruins magically re-form themselves with only the frangipani "a witness to the destruction" reduced to a "crude skeleton" and ashes (149). Mucanga recalls that the anteater had said that the tree was a site of "miracles"; momentarily he "become[s] reborn" (149), and the tree is revivified:

> And when the tree was fully restored, newly born into the fullness of life, I covered myself with the same ash into which the plant had disintegrated. In this way I let myself enter plant life, preparing for my own arborescence. (149)

This growing-with incorporates a disintegration for him and for the others from the old age refuge who are also "bound for the depths of the frangipani tree" (150). Couto represents a stream of Mucanga's fading consciousness as he relinquishes human language to facilitate "tak[ing] on the earth's dialect" (150). His narrative self is finally fading into oblivion, but in some realm his consciousness continues; in a reversal of previous dynamics when the tree

dreamed him, the tree is now his ultimate dream. The novel ends with Mucanga "merging with the sounds of stones" in an echo of Old Gaffer's folk tale. Mucanga has attained his desired oblivion from a narrative self; "his slumber will be deeper than death itself" (150) and he has achieved this through the vehicle of the frangipani tree.

A Slim, Green Silence

In Beverly Rycroft's *A Slim Green Silence* the narrator Connie, like Mucanga, is deceased and returns to the quotidian world on a specific quest for a limited time. Both Connie and Mucanga begin as unquiet spirits, but if Connie is still attached to the joys and suffering of being alive, Mucanga dreads his return; both, finally, accept their separation from the living. Connie died in November 1994 a few months after South Africa had its first democratic elections. She returns on the anniversary of her death as a spirit who observes and with the imperative to heal an issue which she cannot yet identify. Both she and Mucanga have their living and dying closely connected to a tree. In Connie's case this is a yellowwood – a slow-growing indigenous tree near her home which she shares with her sister, Sylvia, in the small town of Scheepersdorp in the Eastern Cape. Connie's relationship with the yellowwood develops in a realistic setting rather than in a liminal realm. Connie nurtures the sapling which was "planted" by a parrot, figuring the tree's personhood as an animal/human subject: it grows "furry and fat" and is so "portly" (51) that its branches provide concealment from their neighbour and irascible guardian, Harry Healey. Battles between the sisters and Harry continue over the years as the tree's fruit attracts the parrots who consume the crop on Harry's pecan tree.

Like *Under the Frangipani*, *A Slim Green Silence* shifts fluidly between the physical world and the spiritual one, but the latter novel also shifts chronologically. As Connie's spirit is ushered back to her home town by the mysterious Boatman, a stately Dr Mkhaliphi, who has rowed her from a nameless place they both inhabit, she is preternaturally aware of hearts beating – Princess's "calm rhythm", Alwyn's "pounding … miraculously steady" and Marianne's "fresh, quick pulse" a sound that she had been "avoiding all along" (21). Connie witnesses her friend Alwyn baptised by Princess in the stream near the yellowwood in a ritual which can only be understood by the reader in retrospect. That he now has Dr Mkhaliphi's transplanted heart beating in his body explains Princess's call to God to *"[c]reate in me a clean heart"* (80) as well as the Doctor's visitation. The donor's spiritual form later manifests a bloody hole in his chest as he repeats "'I am a stranger to this town'" (172), but Connie distracts him from his vulnerability and invites him to the site of the yellowwood which, as in *Heart of Redness* provides solace and comfort.

Rycroft's narrative intersects with indigenous beliefs repeatedly. Princess, like Sipho's mother in "Soweto, Under the Apricot Tree", has buried the umbilical cord of a baby under the tree – that of Marianne, Connie's daughter born soon before her death and whom Princess takes care of. After Alwyn has been through his baptism, a boomslang or treesnake appears in the yellow-wood tree. Although snakes are welcomed in some African societies as connected with "the living-dead or other human spirits" (Mbiti 1990: 51), the workers clearing the vegetation below the tree are terrified by the "inyoka". Alwyn deftly seduces the beautiful green snake into a bag in order to transport it elsewhere.

> In her slim, green silence she drinks it all in: the Kanonkop, the plot, the parrots, the soundless people below. Then she tips her head forward and pours onto [Alwyn's] hooked stick like honey.
>
> (181)

The snake's view from the top of the yellowwood replicates that of Connie's spirit as though they both rely on the tree as a vantage point from which to survey human activity.

The plot of land where the yellowwood grows next to Kanonkop alongside the pecan-nut tree occupies the centre of the narrative and is a key location ontologically: Connie and Alwyn assert their wildness and bravery there and challenge Ivor, the new boy in town, with whom she subsequently falls in love, to daring feats. The tree conceals Ivor and Connie in adulthood when they conceive Marianne the night before his wedding to Janice. The yellow-wood is a witness to these rites of passage as well as a guardian. Connie, like Mucanga, imagines an organic fusion with the tree. She tells Alwyn when they believe they are both dying (Alwyn's heart transplant happened after her death) that she "like[s] the idea of [her] flesh feeding the soil and a thorn tree growing extra tall because of that. Or an aloe. Or a yellowwood" (144). A prerequisite in Connie's terms for vegetal being is death, non-identity and a merging with the tree; the human body, at least, can be of use. This imagined burial recalls Mucanga's longed-for traditional ritual beneath and close to trees.

The yellowwood, like Connie, is not immune to the finitude shared by all beings. Harry blusters that he will chop it down as he blames its fruit for attracting the parrots whom he shoots at every morning. On the day of the return of Connie's spirit, Sylvia threatens Harry with the sale of the plot for financial reasons but Harry offers to donate his wife's money so that the area can become an indigenous garden and education centre. The opening of the environmental centre in memory of Connie is spontaneously celebrated at the same time as Connie's commemoration. The yellowwood tree grows at the centre of this post-apartheid double event with the new mayor, Sandile Sinto, who is Sylvia's partner, officiating. He declares that Connie would have wanted the land to be for all – plants, animals and the community. Not only a

witness to this significant happening in the newly democratic South Africa in a small town in the Eastern Cape, the yellowwood is thus a participant in the process of decolonising the minds of the white inhabitants of Scheepersdorp, as they attend this non-racial event and accept the designation of the park in memory of Connie.

Connie's relationships with plants when she was alive, confirms that she was ontologically constituted by her deep love and knowledge of plants. She plants a climbing dipladenia for the future enjoyment of her daughter. On the return of her spirit to Scheepersdorp she assesses the time of year by observing plants, noting that the nasturtiums are blooming. She acknowledges, unhappily, that alien plants are rampant in the yellowwood plot but characterises the indigenous plumbago hedge as being "passive as a cow" (13) in its submission to the "tickling" of the feasting white-eyes. (13). If Connie animalises the plumbago, Ivor, as a physician, tends to categorise plants with a certain detachment in relation to people. They are alike, he proposes, in their "[d]iseases; companionship; the right amount of distance in a relationship" (86). He believed that "[t]heir genus determined their ills" and that "[a] vigorous, healthy plant did not invite illness" (86). Deploying plants as a metaphor for humans locates the former firmly in language on human terms.

The language that "could help us approximate the world of plants" is "still largely absent" (Irigaray & Marder 2016: 113). Both Irigaray and Marder concur that it is "one of our greatest challenges … to assist it in coming into being … without, at the same time, violating the silence of plants" (113). For Marder "a paradigm shift in our current ideas of discursivity" (113) is called for, suggesting that "gestures and living bodies speak as well, even in the way they inhabit places" (113). In these novels we have been reading, trees themselves become living bodies, arboreal beings which interpermeate humans who are either close to death, like Zim, or already dead like Mucanga. In Couto's and Rycroft's novels the narrative selves of the central characters are entangled with trees, the frangipani and the yellowwood respectively. When they die, their speaking selves disintegrate and merge with the tree with which they have a long and close history. Mucanga is transformed into an arboreal being in his death. Connie's arboreal being is one she had hoped for with her body providing sustenance for a tree on a material level. In Mhlongo's short story, Ten Years may have died in a tree but he is not buried under it nor is he represented as spiritually intertwined with the apricot tree. In *The Heart of Redness* Mda has Zim delight in the prospect of becoming an ancestor, an arboreal being along with the other ancestors. Couto takes the representation of dying without "violating the silence" of trees further. Mucanga, descends into a realm of liminality, stillness and utter serenity. If Zim aspires to being an ancestor, Mucanga prefers oblivion after his experience as an unquiet spirit. He is accompanied into the earth by the old people "bound for the depths of the frangipani tree" (150) as he is.

Rycroft does not have Connie's spirit entwining with the yellowwood so dramatically when she dies. Instead, as she takes her last breaths, she has an awareness of the plot with the yellowwood and identifies with the fly entwined in a spiderweb which "swayed" (227) from the lower branches of the tree like a hammock. She is held by the tree in the element of air rather than descending into the earth like Mucanga. For Marder, plants provide us with air we can breathe. Like plants "we must become the conduits for air, channeling it through ourselves, rather than relating to it as a resource" (Irigaray & Marder 2016: 132). Rycroft imagines Connie's dying process in terms of her breath which she channels rather than grasping it, with Princess singing "I am going to release your breath so you can rest" (226). The air for Connie is now "useless" (226); Princess's act of pressing on her face with a pillow that "nudged the air aside" (226) is one of kindness and love. "If the breathing process is elevated to the level of a mindful practice, then nature is cultivated, both within us and outside us" as Marder puts it (133). At the end for Connie, the mindful focus on her breath and its cessation renders her death a natural process.

Now, her spirit has been successful in resolving the issues which returned her to her home a year after her death – confessing to Bart that Marianne was not his child, being the "giver of benign gifts" (235) to Janice and Ivor who conceive a child. As she is rowed back by Dr Mkhaliphi, she half-imagines the lives of the people she loves, and Alwyn releasing the boomslang near "the depleted forest of yellowwoods" (239) on the other side of the koppie. The yellowwoods feature in her consciousness as Connie relinquishes them and her narrative self.

Conclusion

If Zim, Mucanga and Connie die in close relationships with their beloved trees, these same trees continue beyond the ending of the narratives. The wild fig tree at Qolorha, the frangipani on the terrace of the fort in Mozambique, the yellowwood in Scheepersdorp all outlive the central characters associated with them. Yet in connecting Zim, Ten Years, Mucanga and Connie so closely with trees in their dying, the writers associate trees with the elegiac. Human lives are impermanent too. Inherent in fusion with trees for Zim, Mucanga and Connie, is a loss of their narrative selves: a loss of their stories which have constituted their lives and a loss of their beliefs in a self separate from nature. Fusion goes with disintegration. Humans are taken up into arboreal time and space, but only, like Daphne, through a fatal metamorphosis. Vegetal temporalities merge for humans and trees, as humans inter-permeate arboreal silence.

References

Acampora, Ralph. R.
2006 *Corporal Compassion: Animal Ethics and Philosophy of Body*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Couto, Mia
2001 *Under the Frangipani Tree*. David Brookshaw (trans). Cape Town: David Philip.

Hall, Matthew
2011 *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany*. Coward, Harold (gen ed.) SUNY Series on Religion and Environment. Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press.

Irigaray, Luce & Marder, Michael
2016 Through Vegetal Being: Two Philosophical Perspectives. In: Weinstein, Jami, Colebrook, Claire & Hird, Myra J. *Critical Life Studies*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 36-158.

Marder, Michael
2013 *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Mbiti, John S.
1990 *African Religions and Philosophy*. 2nd ed. Gaberone: Heinemann.

Mda, Zakes
2000 *The Heart of Redness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mhlongo, Niq
2018 *Soweto, Under the Apricot Tree: Short Stories*. Cape Town: Kwela Books.

Plumwood, Val
n.d. Being Prey. *Kurungabaa: A Journal of Literary History and Ideas from the Sea.* January 18, 2011. 19 February 2019.

Rycroft, Beverly
2015 *A Slim, Green Silence*. Cape Town: Umuzi.

Sexton, Anne
1981 When I live in this Honourable House of the Laurel Tree. In: *The Complete Poems*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, pp. 17-18.

Somé, Malidoma Patrice
1999 *The Healing Wisdom of Africa: Finding Life Purpose Through Nature, Ritual, and Community*. New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam.

Wendy Woodward
University of the Western Cape
wendywoodward97@gmail.com