

## Botanical memory: Exploring emotional recollections of native flora in the Southwest of Western Australia



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 28 December 2010

Received in revised form

14 May 2012

Accepted 4 September 2012

#### Keywords:

Memory

Emotions

Plants

Embodiment

Multisensoriality

Ethnography

Australia

### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the nexus of ecology, sensory experience, and emotion through the concept of botanical memory. Building upon theoretical precedents in environmental memory, collective memory, sensory memory, bodily memory, and emotional geography, I describe botanical memory as an important cultural convergence between plants and people. An ethnographic approach to the description of botanical memory draws from transcripts of interviews conducted with amateur botanists and tourists during the spring wildflower seasons of 2009–10 in the Southwest of Western Australia. Visitors from outside the region tend to communicate feelings of celebration and appreciation focused on memories of the beauty of wildflowers. In contrast, local residents engaged in conservation efforts tend to emphasize despair over species and habitat losses witnessed during their lifetimes. The paper concludes by stressing the heterogeneous character of botanical memory as a blend of emotionality, sensuousness, and embodiment. Research into botanical memory provides a promising wellspring for uncovering sense-rich emotional connections to flora.

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Red gum everywhere! Fringed leaves dappling, the glowing new sun coming through, the large, feathery, honey-sweet blossoms flowering in clumps, the hard, rough-marked, red-bronze trunks rising like pillars of burnt copper, or lying sadly felled, giving up the ghost. Everywhere scattered the red gum, making leaves and herbage underneath seem bestrewed with blood.

*-The Boy in the Bush, D.H. Lawrence and Mollie Skinner.  
(1924/2002, 92–93)*

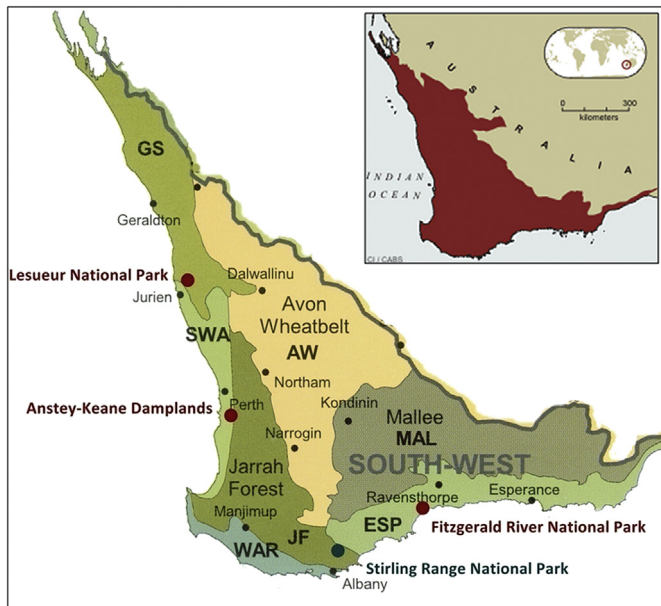
### 1. Remembering plants

This article theorizes botanical memory through the exploration of environmental memory, multisensoriality, and human emotion in the biogeographically diverse terrain of Southwestern Australia. Encompassing an area from Shark Bay to Israelite Bay in Western Australia, “the Southwest,” as the region will be referred to hereafter, is the only internationally recognized Australian biodiversity hotspot. The Southwest is a “botanical province” and one of the most floristically varied places on the globe with close to forty percent of its species occurring naturally nowhere else (Hopper, 1998, 2004; Paczkowska and Chapman, 2000; Corrick and Fuhrer,

2002; Conservation International, 2007; Breeden and Breeden, 2010) (Fig. 1). Since the establishment of the Swan River Colony in the 1800s, the Southwest has been a popular wildflower tourism destination during the spring months of September and October in particular when iconic species, such as kangaroo paws, wreath flowers, and everlastings, blossom (Ryan, 2011; Summers, 2011). However, despite relatively recent recognition of the global importance of its biodiversity, the Southwest has been dramatically altered through modern agricultural expansion, urban development, and anthropogenic plant diseases (Beresford et al., 2001).

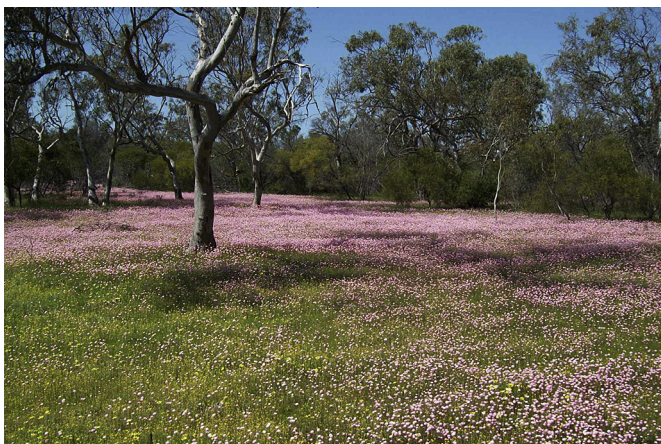
Connecting individual remembrance to collective remembering about thriving or declining plant environments, botanical memory, as I will describe it, entails bodily and cultural memory. The fragrances, sounds, tastes, and tactile sensations of plants summon this form of environmental memory that may be both shared amongst individuals and invoked through physical interaction with flora. Characterized by collective and bodily traces, botanical memory broadens the study of individual sense-based recollection of flora to the human communities living in proximity to native plants. Memories may be of single plants or wildflowers (e.g. wreath flowers shown in Fig. 3); communities of plants (e.g. an everlasting field shown in Fig. 2); or a landscape, region, or broader botanical scale (e.g. the Wheatbelt or the Southwest region itself). This paper will refer to all three scales. Recollections of flora are infused with sensory overtones, and are created by bodies and

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**Fig. 1.** Places of botanical diversity in the Southwest of Western Australia. The Southwest comprises a diversity of places of botanical significance including Lesueur, Fitzgerald River and Stirling Range national parks as well as metropolitan Perth locales such as Anstey-Keane Damplands (Image adapted from Fig. 1, Western Australian Biogeographic Regions and Botanical Provinces, after Thackway and Cresswell, 1995 in Paczkowska and Chapman, 2000, inside cover; Inset image from Conservation International, 2007).

emotions. Such memories are derived not solely from inner imagery but from the sensuousness of plants and places. For example, in a study of the nexus between olfaction and memory, Waskul et al. (2009) observe the capacity of odours to catalyze memories through nostalgic feelings. One respondent notes that wild roses remind her of childhood visits to her grandmother's house in Alberta, Canada, while another interviewee relates the smell of lavender to the comfort of "family, home, and safety" experienced as a child (Waskul et al., 2009: 11). These statements suggest that botanical memory may be defined as remembrance of plants in the context of sensory, cultural, environmental, and familial memories.



**Fig. 2.** Pink everlastings in the Eneabba Region of Western Australia. The common name "everlasting" denotes various species of the cosmopolitan Asteraceae family, such as the pom-pom head (*Cephalopterum drummondii*) (Photo by the author). (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)



**Fig. 3.** Wreath flowers in the Northern Wheatbelt Region of Western Australia. With a genus name celebrating the French botanist Jean Baptiste Leschenault de la Tour and a species name derived from Greek for "large flower," wreath flowers (*Leschenaultia macrantha*) are prostrate-growing plants endemic to the northern Wheatbelt areas near Mullewa and Perenjori (Photo by the author).

As propounded here, botanical memory derives a theoretical framework from related precedents in environmental memory (Chawla, 1994); sensory memory (Seremetakis, 1994); sensory ethnography (Stoller, 1989, 1997; Howes, 2003; Pink, 2009); bodily memory (Connerton, 1989; Casey, 2000); community and collective memory (Boyer and Wertsch, 2009; Hua, 2009); and emotional geography (Bondi et al., 2005; Jones, 2005). This genre of environmental memory involves sensory and emotional interactions with plants. Yet, whereas allusions to memories of plants appear in ethnobotanical literature, they are nearly unheard of in emotional geography, community memory research, or ecocultural studies where, for example, research into the plants–people nexus is governed by the present tense of the ethnographic encounter (for example, Hitchings, 2003; Martin, 2004; Hitchings and Jones, 2004; Hoffman and Gallaher, 2007).

Despite this underemphasis, memories of plants strongly inform human emotional and collective cultural bonds with environments. For early travellers in Western Australia like May Vivienne (1901) or contemporary wildflower tourists to the Southwest, the memory of a place may be indistinguishable from the memory of its plants. Amateur botanist Ayleen Sands (2009) expresses the intertwining of memory and flora as she recalls her first encounter with native orchids early in her proprietorship of Stirling Range Retreat, near the Stirling Range National Park:

So we came in February 1996 and in April one of our first orchids comes out. It's a little orchid which, in the years it flowers, doesn't have a basal leaf (Leafless Orchid, *Praeoxanthus aphyllus*). Someone came to the office and said to me 'Oh, your orchids are out, did you know?' and took me down to show me and I was absolutely rapt.

Sketched as emotion-rich memories, Ayleen's rapture exemplifies the felt engagements between people and flora. Initially, her arrival in the mountainous and biodiverse Stirling Range area from urban and suburban Perth, four hundred kilometres away, entailed anxiety about displacement: "I have to confess that I was really unhappy about coming this far away from Perth initially." Ayleen's statements recall the colonial botanist Georgiana Molloy's experience of living in the isolated settlement of Augusta, Western Australia, in the nineteenth century. For both women, wildflowers attain emblematic significance as consolations for displacement, distance, and loss (Lines, 1994). Like Molloy, through the flowering of orchids, Ayleen has developed an emotional bond and a sense of

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