

Introduction

Nature and Power: Forests

Catherine Addison

This issue of *Alternation* is the first of a pair guest-edited by Urmilla Bob and me and devoted to the general topic of ‘Nature and Power’. Mainly because all of the essays represented in this issue are based on papers delivered at a ‘Literature and Ecology’ colloquium in Mtunzini in October, 2007, the subtheme of this issue is ‘Forests’, reflecting the topic of the colloquium. The second issue, which will also include some papers from the ‘Forests’ colloquium, will take on the broader subtheme of ‘Nature and People’, since its essays will be drawn from a wider selection of academic disciplines, all broadly definable under the heading ‘environmental studies’.

The relationship between ‘nature’ and ‘power’ is an important preoccupation of ecocriticism, as of other branches of environmental studies. The questions that this relationship generate are of course many and in most of them, the ‘power’ that is interrogated is not seen as *possessed by* nature so much as *wielded over* it in a variety of ways. Ecocriticism came into being, in fact, in response to a late-twentieth-century recognition of an ‘environmental crisis’ taking the form of a powerful threat to the health and even the existence of nature, due mainly to global industrialization. Awareness of this ‘environmental crisis’, according to Lawrence Buell in his 2005 book on ecocriticism, has led thinkers of all disciplines to ponder the question of ‘whether planetary life will remain viable for most of the earth’s inhabitants without major changes to the way we live’ (2005:vi). Although this question may seem to have greatest relevance to scientists, economists, urban planners and other scholars of the material world, academics in many different fields have responded to it strongly in their recent theory

and practice. Buell's (2005:vi) book is aimed with an almost missionary fervour at:

all who have the time and will to think strenuously about the implications of the endangered state and uncertain fate of life on earth for literary and cultural studies.

The fact that many practitioners of 'literary and cultural studies' have responded to his and others' prompting and now call themselves 'environmental critics' or 'ecocritics' is a sign of the widespread recognition of the crisis and of its urgency.

Ecocriticism in its early years tended to focus on authors who specifically revered nature and the natural world, such as William Wordsworth and Henry David Thoreau (Buell 2005:21f). Even in 2001, Karla Armbruster and Kathleen R Wallace in *Beyond Nature Writing* reported that the field was still 'dominated by critical analyses of nature writing and literature of wilderness' (2001:1f). However, the more recent trend, including the tendency of Armbruster and Wallace's book, has been to look at the ways in which the environment is represented in all texts, even those that attempt to background it and those in which it is totally urbanized or degraded. Cheryll Glotfelty's definition, though formulated as early as 1996, is still apt since it characterizes ecocriticism very broadly, without mention of nature, as 'the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment' (1996:xviii). The present issue of *Alternation* is much more limited in its scope than Glotfelty's definition allows, being specifically aimed not only at nature but at that subsection of nature designated as 'forests'.

Despite the fact that our continent may be the one most immediately endangered by environmental change, ecocriticism does not appear to have acquired many adherents in South Africa. South African ecocritics so far possess no formal academic association; nor can they yet publish in a dedicated local journal. However, the fact that, since 2004, an annual 'Literature and Ecology' colloquium has taken place is a sign of their continued existence and, in some cases, loyal commitment to the cause. The first colloquium was the brainchild of Dan Wylie of the Rhodes University English Department. Attracted to the field by his own academic interests, he had recently noticed the high-profile status of ecocriticism in North America and Europe and the almost complete absence of practitioners in South Africa—with the notable exception of

Julia Martin at the University of the Western Cape. This first colloquium, in 2004, was hosted in Grahamstown, as were the second and third. Most of the 2005 proceedings were published in a special issue of *Current Writing* (18,1 [2006]) entitled *Animal Geographies, Animal Presences*; many of the 2006 papers have recently appeared as a book entitled *Toxic Belonging? Ecology and Identity in Southern Africa* (2008), edited by Dan Wylie and published by the Cambridge Scholars press. The 2007 colloquium, some of whose papers are printed here, took place at the University of Zululand, where the 2008 one will be held as well; the University of the Western Cape has offered to host a colloquium in 2009. Although a small group of devoted people reappear at these colloquia year by year, others who would probably not cite ecocriticism as their principle field attend sporadically, attracted by specific themes. Despite successes in publishing and a continuing interest, both South African and international, in the very creative, stimulating and collegial atmosphere of the colloquia, the critical mass for a more official status and a free-standing journal has not yet been achieved.

So much for the power of ecocriticism in South African academic circles. To turn to the power of nature as represented by the essays in this issue: a reader will find its degree varying quite radically according to the texts and practices under discussion.

The first essay, Lindy Stiebel's "The Thirst for the Wilderness was upon Me": Africa-as-Wilderness in Rider Haggard's African Romances', deals with colonial texts and, shows how, as one might expect, in Rider Haggard's fiction African nature is commodified for the consumption of the reader and potential adventurer/colonist back home in Britain. However, the power relations between Haggard (and his male English protagonists) and wild African nature are not as simple as this stereotype would suggest. Haggard perceives a kind of sublimity in a wilderness he conceives ambivalently, both as an unspoiled paradise and a fearful heart of darkness. Although he acknowledges the potential for hunting and other exploitative activities, he also seems to have a deep appreciation for unexploited African nature, with all its dangers and beauties. Stiebel notes Haggard's (for a man) unusual penchant for gardening and his delight in orderly British-style gardens walled off from the African wilderness, and yet paradoxically taking much of their value from the presence of this wilder nature surrounding them.

The next essay, 'Francois Levaillant and the Mapping of Southern Africa', by Ian Glenn, emphasizes the ability of maps to assert

power over wilderness. The map that is of central interest in this essay was compiled by and for the eighteenth-century French explorer and ornithologist, Francois Levaiillant, who visited southern Africa in the 1780s. A gift to King Louis XVI that was calculated to pique this monarch's interests in both hunting and extending France's sphere of influence in Africa, the map includes inserts depicting not only indigenous animals and people, but also episodes from Levaiillant's travels in the area, accounts of which were bestsellers at the time. Glenn argues that the map possesses imaginative powers over and above its colonizing potential, for it is a multi-media artefact, including narrative, representation of space and a kind of bio-geography of the whole subcontinent.

Gillian Gane's 'The Forest and the Road: Transformations of Space in Novels by Achebe and Okri' shows that imperial and colonial powers were not the only ones to see African wilderness—forests, in particular—as exploitable resources. In Chinua Achebe's fiction, pre-colonial Igbo men are admired for cutting down and transforming into fertile farms the virgin forest, while non-transformed wild nature is defined as 'evil forest' and shunned as wild women are shunned. Gane provides a brief gender analysis of these attitudes and also demonstrates that Ben Okri's fiction shows a greater awareness than Achebe's of the human damage done to nature. In Okri's novel, *The Famished Road*, the relationship between the road and the forest that it cuts through and displaces is a complex one.

Gane's essay is followed by Syned Mthatiwa's, which also deals with contemporary African writers who display marked concern about the environment and about the destructive power that human development can wield over it. Entitled 'The Depiction of Forests/Trees and Malawi's Rural Landscape in the Poetry of Lupenga Mphande and Zondiwe Mbano', Mthatiwa's essay discusses the negative aesthetic and sociological effects of deforestation and tobacco cultivation on the land and people of (particularly northern) Malawi, and it praises the two eponymous poets for their awareness and exposure of these effects. Mthatiwa points out that many Malawians have traditionally suffered from a kind of 'forest phobia' which causes them to clear forests to remove their perceived dangers. However, Zondiwe Mbano and, even more, Lupenga Mphande value trees and forests not only for their harbouring of meat animals and honeybees and for their provision of shade in a hot country, but also for their intrinsic beauty. Mthatiwa

argues that this aesthetic appreciation of nature for its own sake—which he himself shares—is not a Western import but simply a less conspicuous thread than the homocentric and instrumentalist attitudes that often dominate African world views.

The fifth essay is Dan Wylie’s “‘Long and Wandering Forest’: Sidney Clouts, Geophilosophy and Trees’. Here, Wylie shows how Clouts’s complex poetry reflects a relationship with natural entities such as trees that does not follow the conventional, unequal power relationship of subject and object. Instead of this simple dichotomy Clouts substitutes a complex polarity of perceiver and perceived, in which the immanence of being reverberates into a moment of transcendence. Since South African ecocriticism is, in Wylie’s phrase, ‘seriously under-theorised’, his essay represents an effort to fill the gap. He brings to bear on his reading of Clouts the theory of geophilosophers such as Gilles Deleuze—but also attempts to find a rapprochement between geophilosophy and the phenomenology that appears in many ways more appropriate to Wylie’s own experience of the poet.

Like Wylie, Pat Louw is concerned with the power exerted by human perception on nature—which includes, for Louw, people living close to nature. Her essay, ‘Identity, Place and “The Gaze” in *The Woodlanders* by Thomas Hardy and *dream forest*’ by Daleen Matthee’, analyses and compares two novels in which some characters seem to be truly at home in the forest or woodland while others, who do not really belong there, observe the forest and its denizens with an outsider’s gaze, objectifying and commodifying both. What Louw calls ‘the gaze’ is the action of a subjugating eye, creating dualisms (such as ‘subject/object’, ‘self/nature’) and asserting outsider superiority. In *dream forest*, tourists subject human and animal inhabitants of the Knysna forest to this same alienating scrutiny, as if they were both spectacles provided for the gazers’ consumption. In the two novels, the outsiders are of course generally wealthier and more influential than the forest- or woodland dwellers. Nevertheless, as Louw points out, some of these forest inhabitants possess an enviable awareness of their surroundings that does not assert unequal power relations between the perceiver and the perceived.

My essay, ‘Terror, Error or Refuge: Forests in Western Literature’, moves outside Africa into the literary history of two continents which, in the early stages of their human development, were both heavily forested. Perhaps on this account, forests have always been

powerful symbols in the literature of Europe and North America. Though these forests are often depicted as the opposite of civilization, the dark terror which humans had to destroy by exerting their own liberating and enlightening power—cutting and clearing to build castles and cities—this is not their only portrayal, even in early texts. Forests may be places of testing and trial, or they may figure as refuges, or even as ideal human settlements. In the works of authors from Dante to Frost, forests are seen as wielding power over the human characters who resort to them—power which is, at least ultimately, recognizable as benevolent.

Patsy Maritz, in ‘The Enchanted Forest as a Place of Knowing’, investigates the forest in one particular genre of Western literature: the fairy tale. Focussing on a Russian tale as well as two from Hans Andersen, Maritz shows how the forest, with its resident witch, functions as a place of trial for the stories’ female protagonists. To brave the deep forest and survive an encounter with the witch is to pass successfully into womanhood, according to Maritz, who sees the forest as a specifically female motif.

There are no witches mentioned in Sr. N. Gloria Irenata Biyela’s essay, ‘Securing Women and Children at King Shaka’s Well-Resourced and Formidable Refuge, Nkandla Forest’, though some ghosts—or at least a ‘talking mist’—do appear. This essay focuses on a specific, non-fictional forest in Northern KwaZulu-Natal. Posing for herself the question of why Shaka chose this forest as a refuge for women and children during his war with Zwide of the Ndwandwe clan, Biyela finds her answer partly in the traditional meanings and uses of forests in Zulu folklore and history and partly in the resources offered by the Nkandla Forest itself: clean water, abundant fruit and animals, medicinal plants and the power of confusing enemies in its thick mists and concealing and protecting refugees in its steep and secret vastnesses. She goes on to discuss Nkandla Forest today as a national treasure, worthy of careful conservation, and potential provider of livelihoods for crafters, herbalists and ecotourism practitioners.

Like Biyela’s article, Anne Hutchings’s ‘Ritual Cleansing, Incense and the Tree of Life—Observations on Some Indigenous Plant Usage in Traditional Zulu and Xhosa Purification and Burial Rites’ offers detailed information about the traditional uses of a number of individual plants. She too advocates a respectful, even reverent, attitude towards nature—a nature that is not essentially separate from humankind, or

from the dead and departed. In indigenous Zulu and Xhosa ceremonies of purification, Hutchings finds the reflection of such a holistic world-view.

The next article, 'Environmentally Aware Art, Poetry, Music, and Spirituality: *Lifelines*', is an attempt to demonstrate that a similarly reverent attitude to nature may be cultivated in and through certain art forms and ways of being. The paper takes the form of an interview in which David Levey interrogates Chris Mann about the production of *Lifelines*, a text that is holistic in the sense that it includes poems by Mann, illustrations by Julia Skeen and scientific commentaries by Adrian Craig. Recently published as a book, this work has multimedia dimensions, since it has also been represented by an installation at the 2007 Grahamstown Festival, a show including slides and live music, and a CD. The general theme of the work is animals, with individual poems focussing on specific animals. Levey's questions prompt Mann to outline a holistic perspective that makes possible a return, as it were, to humankind's 'chromosome cousins'—the other animals with whom we share the planet—but a return informed and humbled by physics, history, social conscience and a broad understanding of the environmental harm that we humans have done to ourselves, those other species and the planet itself.

Throughout these eleven essays, forests, woods and wilderness are shown as having a great attraction for human beings, despite or even because of perceived dangers. Though forests may protect people and provide them with resources necessary to their spiritual and physical well-being, human attraction has not so far proved powerful enough to protect forests from people and the depredations of development and industrialization. Fully recognizing our attraction to and need for forests, which operate as the lungs of our biosphere, is the first step in the fight to preserve and regenerate them. The next step may involve adopting the holistic vision advocated by several of the papers in this issue. In this vision, forests and humans are not essentially distinct but operate as centres of energy within a larger living entity whose health depends on the soundness and harmony of all its parts.

References

Buell, L 2005. *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Catherine Addison

- Current Writing* 2006. Special Issue. *Text and Reception in Southern Africa* 18,1.
- Glotfelty, C 1996. Introduction. In Glotfelty, Cheryll (ed): *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Athens: Georgia University of Georgia Press.
- Mann, C & J Skeen 2006. *Lifelines*. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- Wallace, K & R Armbruster 2001. Introduction: Why Go Beyond Nature Writing, and Where To? In Armbruster, Karla & Kathleen R Wallace (eds): *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.
- Wylie, D (ed) 2008. *Toxic Belonging? Ecology and Identity in Southern Africa*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Department of English
University of Zululand