

‘Who is to say ... that the hen did not speak?’ Bird Subjectivities in Some Southern African Narratives

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Abstract

Birds in literary or philosophical texts have been made to carry symbolic weight rather than being perceived as subjects. Luce Irigaray (2004), for example, regards birds as ‘our friends...our guides, our scouts’ as well as ‘[o]ur angels in some respects’, but these ‘spiritual assistant[s]’ barely embody their own lives apart from what they may offer humans. This paper investigates representations of birds as potential subjects in Southern African narratives. The question of ‘the voice’ so topical in earlier postcolonial debate is a fruitful line of enquiry here. Gayatri Spivak’s theorising about how the ‘third world subject’ can be represented in western discourse is remarkably apposite for my purposes in relation to othered birds. Spivak’s contentious question ‘Are those who act and *struggle* mute as opposed to those who act and *speak*?’ (1988:275) may be playfully transposed into a discussion about literary representations of birds and whether they can only be ‘mute’ and, implicitly, without subjectivity. Birds, like the colonised subaltern subject, may appear to be ‘irretrievably heterogeneous’ (1988:284) but some of the narratives, by Schreiner, Miller, Couto, Landsman, Harries and Coetzee, represent birds as possessed of agency, intentionality and access to a voice which sings (or clucks). This suggests that in spite of the ‘epistemic violence’, to use Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s phrase, of an anthropocentric view, it *is* possible, to reach towards an appreciation of a bird as an individual subject.

Keywords: birds, subjectivities, Spivak, Southern African narratives.

Wild and garden birds do not depend on or relate to humans as many nonhuman animals do. Consequently, their subjectivities tend to remain unacknowledged both in reality and in representation. Birds also appear different from nonhuman animals; descendants of dinosaurs, they retain lizard-like features in their legs and thus embody, even more than furred mammals do, apparently incontrovertibly, an alien other: their bodies feathered and clawed, their flight patterns relinquishing of the earth, their birth by hatching rather than from a mammalian uterus. They seem unknowable, too, their eyes dark and opaque, which limits visual connection with humans. Such are the prejudices held against birds, both in general and in the particular. For the last seven or eight years, I have been thinking and writing consistently about animal subjectivities, but birds only sneaked in as afterthoughts, like korhaans through the long grass¹.

This paper is something of an expiation, an invitation to the birds of mostly local literary texts to come out of the undergrowth or the sky and to subject themselves to an enquiry about representation and their putative subjectivities. I have maintained elsewhere that the gaze of a nonhuman animal in Southern African writing not only asserts the agency of the animal but that it may encourage the human subject of that gaze to deconstruct her own sense of privileged personhood in relation to a being who, irrefutably, claims subjectivity (Woodward 2008a). By contrast, birds in literary or philosophical texts have been made to carry symbolic weight rather than being perceived as subjects. Luce Irigaray, for example, regards birds as ‘our friends [...] our guides, our scouts’, as well as ‘[o]ur angels in some

¹ In the poetry I have written over the same period (Woodward 2008b), by contrast, birds recur prolifically as constant denizens in my garden and that of my grandmother. Included, too, are pigeons in the Thames Embankment Gardens, barn owls on UWC campus, a korhaan as a potential spiritual connection with my father. If I have not engaged directly with birds as individual subjects, they are fellow creatures, embodying, at times, wildness within the domestic.

respects', but these 'spiritual assistant[s]' (2004:197) associated with the transubstantiation of the [human] body, barely embody their own lives apart from what they may offer humans².

Birds have tended to be seen quite literally from afar rather than as beings with whom one exchanges a gaze. Esther Woolfson in *Corvus: A Life with Birds* (2008) rather tartly critiques humans' inability to relate to birds, especially corvids, whose 'voices are perceived as harsh, unvarying, and except in rare cases, [as] denying humanity the opportunity to hear reflections of themselves' (2008:64). With their dissimilarity to humans they rarely even approximate what Gayatri Spivak terms 'the persistent constitution of Other as the Self's shadow' (1988:280). Rather than others, birds are represented as alien. A sympathetic Ira Glass concedes that chickens are perhaps 'capable of affection or loyalty or even pride' but undermines his observation: 'if so, they feel these feelings in an ancient and bird-like way, like glassy-eyed visitors from another world' (in Masson 2004:58). Unusually, Tertia Knaap's narrator in *Looking for Io* (2007) is adamant that she makes 'eye contact' with a crippled rock pigeon who comes to her bird table: 'Size difference being so much, one could hardly believe that they knew you had an eye, never mind where it was situated within that enormous bulk. Yet the red-circled eye stared at me directly' (2007:109)³.

That Knaap's narrator is exceptional confirms that a consideration of the bird's gaze is not a fruitful line of enquiry. On the other hand, the question of 'the voice' so topical in earlier postcolonial debate surely is. Spivak's theorising about how the 'third world subject' can be represented in western discourse is remarkably apposite to my purposes in relation to

² Steve Baker writes of 'the arbitrariness of animal symbolism' ([1993] 2001:62-66), citing as an example the photograph of Swapo president Sam Nujoma releasing a white dove 'to symbolise the end of the armed struggle'. See Woolfson's comment below on the aggressiveness of doves.

³ This observation is scientifically correct, it seems. Henry Fountain writes of the study which proves that jackdaws can read the human gaze in specific situations and that the birds 'hesitated to approach their food if an unfamiliar person was looking at it' (http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/14/science/14obeyes.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=Birds+c... accessed 14 April 2009).

othered birds⁴. Spivak's contentious question, 'Are those who act and *struggle* mute as opposed to those who act and *speak*?' (1988:275), may be playfully transposed into a discussion about literary representations of birds and whether they can only be 'mute' and, implicitly, without subjectivity. Birds, like the colonised subaltern subject, may appear to be 'irretrievably heterogeneous' (Spivak 1988:284), but some of the narratives discussed below represent birds as possessed of agency, intentionality, and access to a voice which sings (or clucks). This suggests that in spite of the 'epistemic violence', to use Spivak's phrase (1988:280 and *passim*), of an anthropocentric view, it is possible to reach towards an appreciation of a bird as an individual subject.

Much discussion in Human-Animal Studies has focussed on what constitutes nonhuman animal subjectivity—with the very debate itself contradicting dualistic categorising of animals as entirely other and hence without personhood. The Southern African writers analysed here variously imagine birds as embodying subjectivity and being capable of relationships with humans. At times the birds are both symbols as well as subjects, and may be benevolent, or actively malevolent. Some may even embody spirituality as they confirm or contradict traditional responses to birds. It could be argued, of course, that all texts are anthropocentric because they are written by human animals and filtered through human experience. But this is simplistic. Many writers sedulously undermine the foregrounding of the human view in assigning points of view to nonhuman animals and birds. Such acts of the imagination encourage the reader to subscribe to the possibility that other beings on the planet feel and express emotion, agency, creativity, and even humour. Martha C. Nussbaum, Distinguished Professor of Law and Ethics, argues that any projection into the life of another, whether human or nonhuman, rather than being problematic, is an ethical act:

⁴ In her keynote address at the second Animals and Society conference: *Considering Animals* (2007), Helen Tiffin asked (with reference to Spivak) whether there is a position that the (subaltern) animal can take to be heard. She suggested that novels which have animal narrators are a way to address this issue. My essay, on the other hand, offers a different response.

[I]magine the lives of animals makes them real to us in a primary way, as potential subjects of justice, whereas a contractarian approach, focused on reciprocity between beings endowed with a specifically human type of rationality, is bound to make them only derivatively important (2006:355).

This paper will study birds as putative subjects who may be capable of relationship with humans in the following texts: Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), Ruth Miller's 'The Finches' (1990), Mia Couto's *The Last Flight of the Flamingo* (2004), Anne Landsman's *The Devil's Chimney* (1998), Anne Harries' *Manly Pursuits* (1999), J.M. Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year*⁵ (2007) and articles in local newspapers about two unusual chickens.

In *Manly Pursuits* (1999) Ann Harries is critical of how birds are located within colonialism and valued only for what they may contribute to human pleasure or the extent to which they may ease human nostalgia: the narrator, Wills, is commanded by Cecil Rhodes, then prime minister at the Cape, to 'fill [his] forests with the sounds of all the birds of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire' (1999:13). Wills captures the birds in England and accompanies them to the Colony. Once in the Cape, however, nature (like all that is native) does not conform to colonial desire. The 'songless songbirds' (1999:243-44) are always already victims whom Rhodes rages against because they do not oblige on cue, although they have teachers assigned to them, imitating their calls to remind them of their function. Wills is at pains to point out that the birds suffer because of the difference in seasons; they remain stubbornly silent until one ecstatic moment when he believes he hears the birds singing: 'the blissful music of the English countryside was flooding through the palm tress and bougainvillaea as every blackbird, nightingale, thrush and chaffinch [...] burst inexplicably into song' (1999:263). Once he gets to the aviaries, however, he reports:

I could see in a flash that no nightingale sang, nor any thrush in the

⁵ In spite of Coetzee's residence in Australia and the setting of his novel, I have, expediently, included his representation of magpies which is essential to the debate of this paper.

cage next door. The chaffinches and blackbirds too were songless as ever, hunched accusingly in the dark. The entire clamour tumbled from the cage of starlings who had, to the last bird, given up their vow of silence and were simultaneously exercising their syrinxes not so much in song, as in unadulterated mimicry! The singing lessons they had received daily from their absent tutors now repeated themselves endlessly in the liquid trills, warbles and flutings of their silent co-species (1999:264).

The imported starlings seem to enact Homi Bhabha's notion of mimicry as a disturbing mocking device (1994), tricking colonial authority into believing in an obedient nature which will perform at the behest of a 'master consciousness' (Plumwood 1999:passim). The starlings, unexpectedly agentive in their learning, also mock the colonial consciousness which can only hear beauty in the authentic songs of British birds. Inevitably all these birds, apart from the adaptable, trickster starlings, perish when they are finally released on Rhodes's orders⁶.

Parallel to this colonial instrumentalising of birds is the subjugation of birds to heartless science. Prior to Wills' sojourn at the Cape, he experimented in Oxford on nightingales in order to ascertain '*how, why, when, where* do birds sing?' (1999:254 e.i.o.). Inspired by the imperative that 'the human race deserves an answer' (1999:254), Wills denied their subjectivities—and their suffering. The nightingales were reared in soundproof isolation, only to prove the common-sense conclusion that song is imitative. Later experiments were possibly even crueller, with some of the trapped birds subjected to the constant noise of cymbals so that they could not hear themselves sing. If Harries implicitly critiques such human obsession with birdsong, Irigaray more positively considers it as the birds' desires to 'have us inhabited by a subtle, divine breath' (2004:197). At the same time, the birds '[c]all to love by singing' (2004:198) and 'seem more advanced than we are in the amorous dialogue' (2004:198), which has them located within a human context.

⁶ The common chaffinch localised in the Tokai Forest is a descendant of this introduced species. At least one other bird survived Rhodes' grandiose and ecologically destructive plans besides the starling.

J.M. Coetzee in *Diary of a Bad Year* has his narrator, J.C., think of birds' song as indicative of their subjectivities:

What Cartesian nonsense to think of birdsong as pre-programmed cries uttered by birds to advertise their presence to the opposite sex, and so forth! Each cry is a full-hearted release of the self into the air, accompanied by such joy as we can barely comprehend. *I!* says each cry: *I! What a miracle!* Singing liberates the voice, allows it to fly, expands the soul (2007:132).

Scientific studies of the kind that Wills was party to, as well as the romanticising of birds merely as backdrops to human endeavour, negate such ecstatic expressions of avian subjectivity. In *Diary of a Bad Year* the bird has a self and a soul; the final sentence quoted here is inclusive and surely refers to both bird and listening human.

Such putative spiritual connection between human and bird sometimes features in indigenous tradition. In *The Heart of Redness* by Zakes Mda, Zim's homestead is built under a wild fig tree inhabited by a colony of amohobohobo weaverbirds who keep him company and with whom he shares a discourse, talking to them in whistles, 'the language of the spirits' (2000:135). While Zim, a village elder, lacks any fear of death as he will become a revered ancestor, he still holds on to life, a fact that the villagers blame on his daughter for keeping him in the mortal realm:

Days pass. Zim refuses to die. Amahobohobo weaverbirds fill the homestead with their rolling, swirling song. They miss the man who spent most of the day sitting under their giant wild fig tree (Mda 2000:305).

Not only does the connection between human and bird occur significantly in the face of death, but Mda has the weaverbirds as beings capable of emotion and conscious of missing their human companion. While Irigaray rather romantically imagines birds serving as our guides, Mda connects birds in a traditional Xhosa setting to the spiritual, where communion between birds and humans does not have birds idealised for their ethereal spirituality.

The Believers, Zim and his daughter Qukezwa in particular, have heterarchical (democratic) relationships, even relational ontologies, with the endemic birds. Zim is able to communicate with the hadeda ibis whom he then deploys in his war against Bhonco. Zim sends these ‘drab grey stubby-legged birds’ (Mda 2000:227) to torment Bhonco with their ‘rude laughter’ (227). When the pregnant Qukezwa and Camagu explore the wreck of a ship, they hear a laughing bird but cannot locate it until the giant kingfisher’s arrival on the mast. Qukezwa laughs until she outdoes the bird that flies off ‘yelping its own laughter’ (2000:255) in another close communication between human and bird. For both the kingfisher here and the hadedas earlier, their laughter is evidence of their agency and intentionality, and of their connection with the human sense of the comic. Mda thus represents birds with subjectivity gained partly through their ability to laugh. Clearly, birds have other voices besides just singing, and Mda has them as agents and individuals even if the hadedas act at Zim’s bequest.

Indigenous traditions do not consistently prescribe compassionate rituals in relation to nature. The practice of killing and eating flamingos depicted in Mozambican Mia Couto’s *The Last Flight of the Flamingo* (2004) gives the lie to the sentimental notion that pre-colonial societies lived in symbiotic harmony with nature. Still, this coming-of-age ritual is rejected by one of the characters in Couto’s magical-realist novella, which satirises the corruption and injustices of postcolonial societies and hubristic European interventions to remedy such ills. Flamingos recur symbolically and mythically in the story, which is set in Tizangara where ‘events were things that never happened [... and] the only facts are supernatural ones’ (Couto 2004:1). At the same time, the birds are literal beings who are usually seen from a distance, rather than as subjects with whom the human characters closely interact. The narrative revolves around the apparent spontaneous combustion of United Nations soldiers and the official investigation in the person of Italian investigator Massimo Risi, who is seduced by the age-defying Temporina. The narrator’s mother, in constant mourning for her faithless husband, is inspired by the daily flight of the flamingos, and he recalls how:

She wouldn’t utter a word until those tall birds had been lost from sight. Nor could I move. Everything at that moment was sacred. As

the light faded, my mother, in a low voice, would sing a song that she had drawn from her invention. For her it was the flamingos that pushed the sun so that day could begin on the other side of the world (2004:31).

When the narrator, as an adult, is hiding in the bush years later in an attempt to escape the explosions in Tizangara, he is visited by his deceased mother's spirit, who tells him the story of 'a place where time hadn't invented night' (2004:90). In her fable, the gathered birds plead, to no avail, with the flamingo not to make his last flight, which will bring about night. But he will not be dissuaded:

And off he flew like the chosen one, elegant, shedding his weight.[...]
[I]t was as if the sky had gained a vertebra and the cloud [...] was merely the soul of a bird. One could say even more that it was light itself that was in flight. And with each flap of its wings, the bird was slowly turning the sky's transparent pages (2004:92).

The lyrical myth of the origin of time and night which celebrates a bird as supernaturally powerful has a feminine, maternal source, with the last flight of the flamingo a magical one in this context. The birds are creatures of both light and darkness, with the capability of bringing about natural order.

In the masculine sphere, the narrator's father, Sulpicio, similarly acknowledges flamingos for their mythical power: as his 'saviours' (105) they guided him to land when he had been washed overboard from a fishing boat. Predominantly, however, the birds are creatures of reality in his tale rather than the creatures of myth invented by his wife in an attempt to heal his memories. Thus, Sulpicio's father had taken him hunting flamingos as a child, '*teaching us to be men, with their burden of cruelty*' (2004:147). Sulpicio is neither able to kill the flamingos as they slowly take off nor to eat their flesh. Because it is a '*test of male power*' (2004:149) that he fails, he is shamed and humiliated; his analysis of the emptiness of the initiation as a pretence of male strength cannot absolve him from victimisation.

Finally, when the country disappears quite literally into an abyss, and the narrator and Risi seem marooned, the banality of European solutions to the crisis is metonymised by the paper bird Risi fashions. The narrator,

instead, keeps hope in the advent of flamingos who will usher in another time, and he is comforted by the sound of his mother's song, 'the one she sang so that the flamingos would push the sun from the other side of the world' (2004:179). These birds, for all their ill-treatment on the testing ground of masculinity, suggest the possibility that the two men will be saved from the apocalypse. The flamingos embody forgiveness, a spiritual (feminised) principle, and hark back to Sulpicio's belief in them as 'saviours', recalling Irigaray's sense of birds as 'angels'.

In *Voices Made Night* (1990), by contrast, Couto has birds implicated in the loss of connection with nature because of poverty and because of a brutalising superstition, which has replaced traditional beliefs. If birds are spiritualised as they are in 'The Birds of God' and 'The Talking Raven,' they tend to be seen as evil and connected with doom. These birds, like the flamingos, embody close connections with the spirit world, but a sense of the danger embodied in animals is endemic for people who have lost touch with nature. People not only fear becoming an animal spirit or *noii*, but birds themselves, like those in 'The Birds of God,' seem gratuitously evil, engendering madness and death. Couto suggests that when (colonial) violence or (postcolonial) war is/has been paramount, traditional relationships with nature are occluded. Zuze Paraza, in 'The Talking Raven's Last Warning', manipulates the villagers into believing that he has vomited a raven who had arrived 'from the furthest frontier of life' (1990:8) and who has privileged links with the spirit world only he can interpret—for a large fee. Dona Candida, whom Paraza tricks into believing that the bird speaks with the voice of her late husband, 'flinch[es]' when the bird alights on her shoulder:

She eye[s] the animal suspiciously. Seen from that position, the raven [is] as ugly as can be. If you want to admire the beauty of a bird, never look at its feet. The claws of a bird preserve its scaly past, a legacy of creepy-crawling reptiles (1990:10).

Couto satirises the villagers who accept the wily, thieving Paraza as a sorcerer and as the 'switchboard operator of the spirit world' (1990:13). When the raven is accidentally killed, they interpret this as a curse and leave the village 'drift[ing]' aimlessly like the feathers [of the raven] that the wind

slowly scattered in the distance' (15), as though they are as implicated as the raven in death and cosmic directionlessness.

In 'The Birds of God', Couto again deploys birds as having symbolic significance for poor villagers, who are starving because of a drought. Ernesto Timba, a fisherman, is 'impaled' by the expectant eyes of his wife and children: 'Eyes like those of a dog, he was loath to admit, but the truth is that hunger makes men like animals' (1990:23). In this dysfunctional, imbalanced milieu animals signify only instinct; the material is all-important, the spiritual irrelevant. But Timba remembers his father's encouragement: "the fisherman can't see the fish inside the river. The fisherman believes in something he can't see" (24). When a large bird falls into his boat, it is, for him, 'a sign from God' (25). The bird is later joined by a mate and then chicks, whom Timba cares for at the expense of his family, believing that if humans, especially when they themselves are hungry, can be kind to these 'messengers from heaven' then the drought will break.

To the villagers, Timba is 'stark raving mad' (1990:26). When the birds are deliberately destroyed in a fire, he calls on God to forgive the perpetrators of this act, and offers himself as a sacrifice. The next day his body is found in the river and cannot be extricated from the water. The story is potentially ambiguous about whether it is Timba's sacrifice and his spiritualised connections with birds that bring the approaching rain or whether it is chance. The river is 'impassive...laughing at the ignorance of men' (28), but Timba seems not to be included in this 'ignorance' as his body is gently 'carried downstream, and shown the by-ways he has only glimpsed in his dreams' (28). Whatever one's reading of this story, Timba is exceptional in *Voices Made Night* for his nurturing of 'another's', to use Murphy's term (2000:passim), yet the narrative undermines his compassion for birds as adversarial because of the damage he does to his family.

In Ruth Miller's 'The Finches (A Verse Play for Radio)' (1990), she dramatises agri-business's cruel disregard for nature, particularly for the birds who are judged as pestilent. Tom and George fly planes which 'knock hell' out of the 'damn finches' by spraying them with poison. Unlike George and the Farmer, Tom has a conscience about what he does, which gives this very short play its tension. Miller not only represents birds here in the political sense by, in Spivak's term, speaking for them but also interprets

their voices as intelligible to humans in an attempt, presumably, to render birds less other and as subjects with a message:

Dying ... It's a dying all about us;
limp, soft, inert; petal feet curled
in the last grip which finds nothing.
Feathers flat in the wind which keeps blowing
fumes over the land; the whole green world
a planting, reaping, sowing—
but when we hunger for the good rich seed
we hear the engines. [...]
We fly. We fly—but something in our throats
is linked to that terrible sound
and we fall like seeds on the land—even the road
is splashed with the harvest Somebody has gleaned (1990:136).

Here we get the birds' agonised and embodied point of view. As subjects the birds understand the connection between the plane and their destruction; tragically, as much as they fear death, they are powerless to subvert it. Because of the malevolently absent God-like 'Somebody', who is responsible for the cruelty and bloodiness of their deaths by pesticide, their lives, like that of the harvest they are killed to protect, can only be sterile. Ominously, with their very deaths part of the harvest, an ecological apocalypse is hinted at. Lionel Abrahams dismisses this play as part of Miller's attempt to 'distance and cool her art, to rescue it repeatedly from the suffocation of the personal' (1990:16). He fails to recognise her very strong ecological critique, which cannot be described as 'cool' either here or in many other poems (see Woodward 2001).

Unlike Miller's finches, who are victims of violence and the functionalism of industrialised agriculture, ostriches are agentive in two texts through being actively malevolent. In *The Story of an African Farm* (1975 [1883]), Lyndall drives the ostrich who hates Bonaparte Blenkins in his direction in the hope that the bird will kill him. Instead, as Blenkins rifles through Old Otto's pathetic earthly possessions, the unseen ostrich pecks Blenkins' bald head and snatches a gold ring. The superstitious and guilty Blenkins is convinced that he has been visited by the devil. In *The Devil's*

Chimney (1998), Mr. Henry, who has subjected his ostriches to suffering in the ill-timed plucking of their feathers and who is ignorant about the protectiveness of nesting birds over their eggs, is attacked, ‘cut up like a fruit salad’ (1998:232) by a pair of mating birds. They ‘kicked him and split him lengthwise and sideways. It was worse than a lion who does your throat and then you are dead and ready to be eaten’ (1998:231). Even as he is dying with his ‘whole chest unbuttoned’ finally, ‘the birds st[and] over him, staring and waiting’ (1998:232)⁷.

Perhaps I am being too hasty here, asserting subjectivity for the ostriches in both these texts. It could be argued that they exemplify merely a *deus ex machina*, for, apart from their aggressive agencies, they are not developed as subjects. Agency on its own is surely insufficient for subjectivity. Still, the actions of the ostriches in both Schreiner’s and Landsman’s texts are inspired by their emotions, and the unnamed ostrich in *The Story of an African Farm* makes his/her own choice not to kill Blenkins but rather to appropriate the shiny jewellery. What is indisputable, however, is that the malevolence of the magpie-in-chief in *Diary of a Bad Year* accords him an extensive subjectivity. Like the ostrich pair, this magpie has been instrumentalised and threatened. In addition, he has had his habitat removed and turned into a park with a concreted creek.

He (that is how I think of him, male to the core) walks in slow circles where I sit. He is not inspecting me. He is not curious about me. He is warning me, warning me off. He is also looking for my vulnerable

⁷ If ostriches have a reputation for being menacing, chickens do not. Yet the *Daily Sun* (a local tabloid) carried a banner headline: ‘Horror of Evil Chicken!’ I imagined a chicken protesting against being slaughtered, maybe even running amok (if chickens can), but this chicken had a dubious agency projected onto her. The story by Matseko Ramotekoa (28 April:3) was about a dead chicken found outside Angelina Lekaota’s shack—obviously put there, opined a sangoma, by a someone who wished her ill. That her daughter died that night (although in another town) proved his interpretation of the dead chicken, rendered even more ‘evil’ by the fact that there were no visible signs of death.

point, in case he needs to attack, in case it comes down to that (2007:207).

J.C., or 'Senor C' (as the character Anya calls him), imagines that the magpie agrees to a 'compromise' in which the human animal will 'beat a retreat into one of the protective cages [...] on the far side of the street' and only come out when the magpie is 'tak[ing] a snooze' (2007:208). The narrator thinks himself into the mind of the bird, imagining a bird-centric vision:

The magpie-in-chief has no firm idea of how long human beings live, but he thinks it is not as long as magpies. He thinks I will die in that cage of mine, die of old age. Then he can batter the window down, strut in, and peck out my eyes (2007:208).

The commanding magpie is a very different being from Irigaray's selfless avian helpers. Not only is his gaze malevolent (like that of Landsman's ostriches), but it is predatory in his view of the human body as an edible resource. For Coetzee the magpie is a specific subject who is not 'irretrievably heterogeneous', to use Spivak's phrase. He has individuality with an extensive world-view; he displays initiative, he has emotions, intelligence, and a strong awareness of the trajectory of a life.

That practiced observer of corvids, Esther Woolfson, is adamant that birds have rich emotional lives. Displays of a panoply of their emotions, she argues, are entirely 'recognisable', so similar are they to those of humans (2008:164). Coetzee's magpie has, finally, the potential to connect with a human on his own terms. Far from being an etherealised, spiritualised 'guide', this bird walks on the ground and has the ability to recognise a human face (as scientific experiments have recently proved).⁸ He has his territory, a notion of home, and the correct order of life. Responsive to his gaze, J.C. deconstructs his own subjectivity in relation to the magpie, whom he thinks of as a master of the space they both inhabit.

Magpies have had a bad press and are notorious for being pugna-

⁸ See 'Friend or Foe? Crows never forget a face, it seems' (<http://nytimes.com/2008/08/26/science/26crow.html>).

cious. Woolfson, who confesses to experiencing an ‘incomplete piercing’ of one of her ears by a magpie (2008:133), argues that they are no more combative than doves or butterflies and analyses the limitations of categorising them so negatively:

Magpie aggression is only in the nature of our own aggression, territorial, sporadic, to do with the essentials of life: space, sex, food. It has nothing to do with intoxication, greed, revenge and the other dismal range of human banes. There are days when, contemplating the news, it seems worse than simple irony that we should dare to call magpies aggressive (2008:133).

The belligerence of Coetzee’s magpie is never represented as humanised, nor as infused with what Woolfson calls the ‘dismal range of human banes’. Instead, his angry response can be attributed to the issue of space—his loss of habitat to the unthinking and uncaring human colonising of his territory.

The birds most conventionally and unthinkingly deprived of this ‘essential of life’ are, of course, chickens (*Gallus gallus domesticus*). In addition, the dominant discourse of chickens as ‘bird-witted’ or ‘feather-brained’ conveniently serves to minimise human guilt at consuming them. To paraphrase a comment by David Lurie in Coetzee’s *Disgrace* about nonhuman animals: ‘Do we like chickens? We eat them so we must like them, some parts of them’ (2000:81). A number of recent texts challenge this stereotype; for example, Coetzee has Elizabeth Costello report in *The Lives of Animals* (1999) on the experience of Albert Camus:

‘[As] a young boy in Algeria, his grandmother told him to bring her one of the hens from the cage in their backyard. He obeyed, then watched her cut off its head with a kitchen knife, catching its blood in a bowl so that the floor would not be dirtied.

‘The death-cry of that hen imprinted itself on the boy’s memory so hauntingly that in 1958 he wrote an impassioned attack on the guillotine. As a result of that polemic, capital punishment was abolished in France’ (1999:63).

That this hen voiced a ‘death cry’ attests to the bird’s perceptiveness and her dread of death. Significantly, Coetzee has Elizabeth Costello argue

vociferously that “[a]nyone who says that life matters less to an animal than it does to us has not held in his hands an animal fighting for its life” (1999:65). Coetzee begins *Boyhood* with John’s memory of his mother torturing hens who are not laying by cutting off the horny shells under their tongues:

The hens shriek and struggle, their eyes bulging. He shudders and turns away. He thinks of his mother slapping stewing-steak down on the kitchen counter and cutting it into cubes; he thinks of her bloody fingers (1997:2).

The juxtaposition of motherhood with the bloody preparation and consumption of nonhuman animals is shocking, as is the connection between motherhood and the chickens’ torment. The parallel between the experience of the young Camus and that of the young Coetzee is unmistakable.

Paradoxically, given the horror of the lives of battery chickens—imprisoned and tortured, the better to serve as human food⁹—the most dramatic instances of bird subjectivity in the South African media in recent years have been the chickens Veronica and Zola. In 2003, Brett Bailey’s *iMumbo Jumbo* staged the slaughter of a chicken by a sangoma on the play’s last night in Cape Town. Bailey was described by Barbara Mathers, general manager of the Third World Bunfight Theatre Company, as ‘working in two realms, between theatre spectacle and ritual. For him the slaughter was not senseless because it is a ritual that happens in everyday life’ (Kemp 2003:1), but the audience, predominantly, remained unconvinced. The outcry was huge. Members of the public walked out. Letters to the newspapers were tearful and offended. SPCA chief inspector Shaun Bodington confirmed that the production company did not have a permit to slaughter an animal in a public venue and wanted to ‘determine [...] whether the animal suffered before it was killed’ (Ndenze 2003:6). The debate soon became racialised as tensions between African and Western beliefs about animals and slaughter were highlighted.

⁹ In the novel *Two Caravans* (2007:120-49), Marina Lewycka depicts the confusion and pain of battery-farmed chickens and the various responses to working with them: horror, grief, bravado, brutality, and indifference.

What interests me here, though, is that the chicken who was slaughtered so publicly was a stunt double who had been purchased from a stall in Philippi to replace Veronica at the crucial moment. The chicken that had been performing for three weeks with the cast was spared because they had ‘got really attached to her’ (NP 2003:3). Naming confirms the acknowledgement of Veronica’s subjectivity, but such recognition was not transferred to another chicken. While Mathers described Veronica as “‘a spoilt chicken’”, she at least praises her intelligence, commenting that she “‘had grown to “know” the play and effectively acted her way out of the death sentence’” (NP 2003:3), whereas the nameless chicken is represented as less adept because she flapped her wings in the performance. Brett Bailey was adamant that the slaughtering of the chicken was ceremonially required, that it ‘felt phoney’ to return Veronica to her crate every night and that he did ‘not regret that [the sacrifice] was performed’ (Cape Times 2003), thereby negating the relevance of animal rights and the specific right of the chicken to a flourishing life.

More recently, another chicken caught the imagination of the public. In *The Cape Times* Jo-Anne Smetherham notes: ‘The chicken crossed the road not to get to the other side but to live in the fast lane’ (2008:4). Zola, because of her own speediness, was named after the runner Zola Budd; appearing on the side of the highway, she resisted all attempts to capture her and confidently set up a nest in the middle of the freeway. Finally, in 30-degree heat, SPCA inspector James Murphy and two others cornered the ‘streetwise’ chicken: “‘We were chasing after it on the M5 wearing our high visibility vests, with traffic passing at about 80kmh [... D]rivers probably thought we were nuts’” (2008:4); but, as Murphy says later: “‘This bird has captured the hearts and minds of Capetonians. We’ve received a lot of calls’” (2008:4).

Veronica and Zola were assigned biographies, their subjectivities acknowledged, but the stunt double was not and so could be slaughtered with impunity. Because these two hens were represented as extraordinary, Veronica with her acting ability and Zola with her wilfulness (which put her in so much danger), they were seen as existing beyond mere ‘struggle’ that would have rendered them ‘mute’. Coetzee has Costello muse about the chicken that persuaded Camus of the immorality of the guillotine: “‘Who is to say, then, that the hen did not speak?’” (1999:63). Cynically, one could

maintain that even this sympathetic appreciation of her voice shifts between a recognition of her agency and the possibility that her subjectivity derives from her mere function as a dying metonym for condemned humans. Yet while subjectivity for birds may be contingent and fragile, they are represented as speaking/singing/clucking when they have agency, intentionality, or, in Camus's case, when they suffer. They are not, of course, exceptional, merely represented as such¹⁰. All other birds who may flap their wings so annoyingly on stage or who do not manage to prove that they are streetwise or agentive in their preference for the fast lane do not apparently merit such consideration.

The problem lies with the 'epistemic violence' of anthropocentric discourse, which prefers its chickens obtuse, unnameable, and therefore eminently edible without a twinge of the eater's conscience. Chickens can cluck or utter death-cries, birds can sing, but they remain unheard and are retrievable subjects only occasionally as the texts above attest. Spivak asks how to render the individual vocal; the pre-requisite, of course, in relation to birds, is the recognition of an individual bird as an autonomous subject who lives a life beyond mere 'struggle'. This is proven by their acting agentively, like Veronica or Zola or the magpie-in-chief, who are all represented as *speaking* and heard. But when aggressive ostriches are agentive, their actions are limited to their malevolence towards humans, which suggests that in order to approximate speaking subjects birds must be rendered capable of expressing one or more additional characteristics such as humour, creativity, or fear of death.

The majority of birds discussed in this paper are not acknowledged as even potential subjects within the dominant discourse. Rhodes, for example, never for a moment truly hears the voices of the native birds in the Newlands ravines. In an echo of the subaltern other, those birds who live lives defined by struggle and pain like the finches in Miller's play remain mute to the characters who encounter them, if not to the attuned reader or to the writer who critiques this discourse as Harries and Miller do. Mda implicitly critiques the Irigarayan impulse to have birds as mere spiritual symbols: Zim's weaverbirds may embody close connections with traditional

¹⁰ In *The Pig who Sang to the Moon: The Emotional World of Farm Animals* Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson writes of the subjectivities of 'ordinary' rather than exceptional chickens (2004:55-95).

spirituality, but they do so agentively rather than being the menacing or doom-laden symbolic creatures of Couto's *Voices Made Night*. Finally, one has to concede that even if many of the birds considered here are not represented extensively as subjects, that their lives have been imagined at all, like the eponymous, lyrical birds in *The Last Flight of the Flamingo*, constitutes some challenge to an anthropocentric worldview that cannot conceive of birds having lives, let alone subjectivities¹¹.

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¹¹ As I write this final paragraph the resident garden birds are vociferously active on an evening after hours of rain: sparrows consider the darkness of my study from their perch on the creepers, a starling is shooed off the lawn by a dove, an olive thrush poises on the vine and a Cape robin does what looks remarkably like a joyful somersault between a protruding light and the wall.

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