

# Editorial: Coastlines and Littoral Zones in South African Ecocritical Writing

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This volume represents scholarly articles based on papers delivered at the 8<sup>th</sup> annual Southern African Ecology and Literature Conference, held in August 2011, in the coastal town of Kleinmond in the Western Cape. Since its inception, the conference has generated a substantial body of interdisciplinary scholarship in locally situated ecocriticism, as evidenced by several special issue journal editions, most notably in the form of a long-standing association with this journal. Ecoliterary criticism, which Timothy Clark (2011:viii) defines as the ‘study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment’ in the context ‘of the current global environmental crisis and its revisionist challenges to given modes of thought and practice’, is thus firmly established in the humanities in Southern Africa.

The conference theme ‘Coastlines and Littoral Zones’ invited speakers to interrogate representations of the sea, the shoreline, islands, rivers and estuaries in South African imaginative fiction and cultural practice, as well as comparative work from elsewhere. At first glance such a focus on the oceanic, coastal and fluvial in South African writing would be appear to be marginal to, or even at odds with the dominant concerns in our literature. The great theme in South African English literature, from Olive Schreiner’s *Story of an African Farm* (1883) to Alan Paton’s *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948) up to Damon Galgut’s *In a Strange Room* (2010) – to pick just one recent novel – is undoubtedly the contested idea of the land and how it is to be represented, for instance through the modes of the pastoral, the anti-pastoral, or in terms of self-ironizing postmodern detachment. The fraught question of how one is to live in this land, be native to it, or, conversely, what it means to be alienated from it, haunts not only South African social relations into the present, but also its literature, most

clearly perhaps visible in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999), in the form of Lucy's fate as she deals with the violent claims to her body that are entangled with her ownership of an Eastern Cape smallholding. There is hardly a significant writer who has not engaged in some form with the question of land, belonging, rootedness and identity. South African literature is largely a narrative of 'unsettled settlers' to use J.M. Coetzee's phrase in *White Writing*, a literature in which the aesthetic engagement with landscape is inseparable from 'landed property' (1988:4 - 6).

Take for example this moment from Alan Paton's autobiography on his return to South Africa after an overseas study trip to London. After a long Atlantic boat journey, the miraculous appearance of the beloved land on the oceanic horizon is rendered in epiphanic language:

[T]he sight of Table Mountain rising from the sea overwhelmed me. I doubt if I put my thoughts into words, but it was clear that at the age of twenty-one I had, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, given myself to this strange country, to love and to cherish till death do us part (Paton 1986:62).

In the language of the irrevocable marriage vow, Africa here possesses Paton and Paton possesses Africa, and it is clearly the sea and the overseas which he turns his back to. Of course it was the question of belonging, the evocative claim to the contested African landscape and its very soil that became the driving emotive force in Paton's subsequent fiction. Paton's commitment to a terrestrially imagined future, grounded in the African landscape, leaves no place for an oceanic imaginary.

Much of our country's colonial history was framed by a relentless push away from the coast, towards the great interior spaces of Southern Africa. It was a move away from the shore and from the umbilical attachment to the European motherland beyond the sea, in search of an authentic sense of self in the strange land. The sea as a topos in South African fiction has thus been, I would suggest, unusual, and may perhaps be understood – where it occurs – as a gesture of deliberate or sometimes unintended retreat from or disengagement with the way questions of land and nation, dispossession and settlement, aesthetics and politics had become entangled in ways that became increasingly ugly as the 20<sup>th</sup> century wore on. An engagement with a more

liquid and connective space of flux and flow, detached from the divisive politics of the land, could be a space of alternative imaginative investment, a form of quiet dissidence from the debilitating rigidities of the ‘dry white season’ which characterized late apartheid culture.

The heterotopic quality of the sea in late apartheid fiction is paradigmatically evident in Nadine Gordimer’s *Sport of Nature*, a sprawling novel of a pan-African liberation struggle where the exiled heroine finds solace from the trauma of her violence-wracked continent in the sea, an environment where memory can reconnect her to a long-lost lover:

[T]he swim was a gentle engulfment through ghost-pale shallows until the body was taken, like the streak of another substance into the watery layers of agate, into the still, clear sea. She floated and recalled without pain the yellow swimsuit and the emergence of the obsidian arms, head and torso from the sea. The water itself washed pain away; there was only sensuality (Gordimer 1988:318).

It is significant though that Gordimer’s scene of oceanic healing and her imagined intimate connection with the black body of her lover – who must be understood as a metonym for the African continent itself – is set on the tropical Tanzanian coastline, and not on a cooler South African shore. An embodied sense of fluid freedom and connectedness is evidently not imaginable in the South Africa of the 1980s, apart from the fact that black and white bodies could in any case not legally mingle in its littoral zones.

The way in which South African writing, pre-1994, offered little space for an oceanic imaginary is also evident in the lesser known textual history of J.M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980). The novel is set in an imaginary semi-desert landscape in which the empire’s hold on territory and power is unsettled by the real and imagined threat of nomadic outsiders. Despite its fictional setting in a locale far removed from any recognizable South African landscape, the novel has frequently been interpreted as an allegory of the late apartheid stasis that was marked by violence, and an erosion of human relationships. A look at the novel’s earliest drafts however shows that Coetzee had not initially chosen the setting of a dry continental interior, but had located the story on his own country’s coastline, on Robben Island, a highly significant and symbolically rich South African locale. In the

early manuscript, now preserved at the Harry Ransom Centre at the University of Texas in Austin, South Africa is in its post-revolutionary phase with floods of white refugees having fled the country. The new authorities have designated Robben Island as an embarkation point for the last stragglers awaiting rescue by UN chartered ships. The novel's protagonist is Manos Milis, a middle-aged university professor of Greek descent, who, like the other refugees, is trapped in a state-less limbo unable to return to the mainland, but is also waiting interminably for the boat. Coetzee's narrative has transformed the notorious prison island, that at that time still housed black political convicts, into a bleak camp for whites who no longer have a home in Africa, but cling tenuously to its shores in the vain hope for repatriation. The narrative effects a neat reversal of South Africa's history: the European settlers who had arrived some 350 years earlier on the Cape shore, now find themselves driven back to the coast awaiting an uncertain future beyond the sea. The novel remains unfinished in this form, as if Coetzee needed to abort an island story that remained trapped by the country's fraught terrestrial past and unable to move towards a trans-oceanic future beyond its borders. Written in the year after the 1976 Soweto unrest, the stasis of Robben Island signals that no new beginning (and no narrative progression) is possible that would transcend the deadlocked settler – native dialectic. It is however possible to imagine that elements of this embryonic novel became split and reutilized in two later fictions: the dystopic Cape Town setting which recurs in the opening sections of *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983), and the kelp-ringed, desolate Atlantic island in *Foe* (1986). As in Gordimer's narrative, the imaginative engagement with the sea in Coetzee's most oceanic novel does however not happen on the South African shoreline, but is displaced to a fictional elsewhere.

Stephen Gray's well-known oceanic metaphor for Southern African literature as an 'archipelago' whose 'islands with their peaks protrude in in set positions, even if one does not readily see the connections between them beneath the surface' (1979:14) is remarkable for its underlying optimism in discerning fluvial connections in a national culture that had structurally grown apart. But if we think of the sea as an open, fluid space that is potentially receptive to imaginative stagings of a freer, less restricted subjectivity – and consider the paucity of such fictional engagements on the pre-1994 literary scene – it is perhaps useful to think of the land–sea

opposition in terms of Deleuze and Guattari's distinction between 'smooth' and 'striated' space. The sea is smooth space *par excellence*. Striation is the effect of 'territorialisation' taking the form of grid-like settlements, fences, infrastructure, monoculture and the panoptic township native yard, an inexorable process which has left no space on the face of the country unmarked. *A Thousand Plateaus* recounts an 'extended confrontation between the smooth and the striated in which the striated progressively takes hold' (2003:363 - 364). Writing the sea, in South African letters, may in this sense be a form of imaginative deterritorialisation that undoes topographies of power.

It is perhaps not surprising then that postapartheid narratives have been much more open and receptive to imaginative engagements with the sea and coastal landscapes, as is shown in Meg Samuelson's opening essay in this volume. Several recent novels have explored oceanic and littoral locales, and the range of this fiction is apparent if we compare the very different treatment of a Cape marine environment in Zakes Mda's *The Whale Caller* (2006) and Peter Church's *Dark Video* (2009). The former utilizes the sea as a receptive environment for connective cross-species imaginings that break down former binary oppositions, whereas Church's shark-haunted thriller merely displaces the terrestrial violence of Cape Town on to an even more savage sea. But perhaps the most paradigmatic instance of a text that utilizes the sea as a setting, and as a powerful metaphor for the boundless possibilities inherent in the political transition, is the recent Afro-Surf film *Otelo Burning* (Blecher 2011). The film's young protagonist is Otelo Buthelezi who, together with other township youth, discovers an unlikely passion for surfing. Set in the third-force violence wracked 1980s, during which Kwa-Zulu Natal townships became engulfed in a low-grade civil war, the film shows how Otelo and his friends experience the power of the waves as an exhilarating space of personal freedom. The tension between the violent, burning township and the liquid, transformative liberation of the sea can ultimately not be resolved, and on the day of Nelson Mandela's release from prison, Otelo, by now a gifted surfer, makes a fateful decision and chooses a tragic redemption in the waves. Despite some uneven cinematography, the film offers a powerful narrative of the South African transition in which the fixity of a racial script and an entrapment in a violent history can give way to new fluid identities that merge seamlessly into the

environment, even if its hero is ultimately denied a liberated future that would have connected him to a global aquatic community.

The papers collected in this volume are all thematically linked in their coastal and oceanic subject matter, but offer different theoretical approaches and points of departure. Meg Samuelson's opening essay, 'Sea Changes, Dark Tides and Littoral States: Oceans and Coastlines in Post-apartheid South African Narratives', gives a valuable wide-ranging and comprehensive overview of recent South African literary production that situates itself in the tension between the oceanic and the terrestrial. Samuelson contextualizes the oceanic turn in South African literature within the country's broader cultural transformation, and its orientation from a terrestrially bound nationalism towards a global connectiveness.

Hedley Twidle's contribution traces the evolution of a maritime genre, the ship's log or 'dagregister', as it makes landfall at the Cape, and evolves into its terrestrial iteration, namely the diary. The essay is a nuanced analysis of the connections between Stephen Watson's and Athol Fugard's Cape-based diaries, and Camus's North African littoral writing, and explores the imaginative possibilities of the genre, arguing that this marginal literary form allows a different form of environmental sensibility to emerge.

James Ocita takes stock of the trend in postapartheid Indian literature and memoir to return to the past. Looking at three recent novels that deploy sojourner and passenger memories of oceanic travel, Ocita argues that these stories help to lay claim to an inclusive sense of citizenship that is simultaneously ethnically aware as well as historically grounded in Africa.

In her article on a Dalene Matthee novel, Pat Louw analyses the representation of two different colonial island spaces, showing how altered forms of identity are possible in Robben Island and Mauritius respectively. Louw shows how nature is constructed in relation to the self, and how this embodies ideas of transformative social justice.

Isaac Ndlovu critically reads a recent South African travelogue, namely Justin Fox's *The Marginal Safari* which 'scouts' the coast and borderline of the country. Ndlovu argues that the text owes a debt to a compromised colonial tradition of travel writing, and that its coastal, circumnavigatory trajectory reveals an authorial positioning of postapartheid marginality that looks from the outside in, and can consequently not fully come to terms with the changes in the heart of the country.

Stephen Gray's essay 'A Small Colony of Persons: Tristan English and the Outside World' takes as its object the social and geographic isolation of the mid-Atlantic island Tristan de Cunha. Both personal travelogue and finely-grained cultural research, the paper traces the development of Tristan English and a unique society that emerged in the interplay of outside influences and its isolated island setting. Gray's paper was not presented at the conference but has been included in this issue for reasons of thematic complementarity.

Julia Martin's and Dan Wyllie's papers are both rich, contextualized close readings of two South African coastal poets. Martin reads Douglas Livingstone's remarkable poems in *A Littoral Zone* as a form of 'secular sacramentalism' that engages with the environment outside of the narrow, temporal concerns of human society. Wyllie's reading of Brian Walter's Swartkops poems shows how an Eastern Cape estuarine location becomes the ecological nexus of place and identity.

Philip Aghoghovwia's analysis of the way Tanure Ojaide imagines the environmental devastation of the Niger Delta in his poetry, brings a valuable West African perspective to this collection of essays. Aghoghovwia reads Ojaide's poetry in terms of Amitav Ghosh's concept of the 'oil encounter' and also offers a critique of Western notions of environmentalism that do not connect meaningfully with African concerns around social justice.

Deb Mansfield's contribution is both a presentation of her artistic practice, as well as a theoretical discussion of littoral zones and bourgeois domesticity, as mediated by the notion of the 'armchair traveller'. Mansfield contrasts the representation of tropical Pacific landscapes in early nineteenth century French scenic wallpaper with the atypical littoral zones in her own artistic practice.

Wendy Woodward's essay 'Amphibious Horses: Beings in the Littoral and Liminal Contact Zones' reflects on a life-long love-affair for horses as it recounts personal memory and childhood reading. The last contribution is Chris Mann's poem 'Whale-watching' which celebrates 'the song-ships of the deep', written in the year that marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of the International Whaling Commission's moratorium on commercial whaling.

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