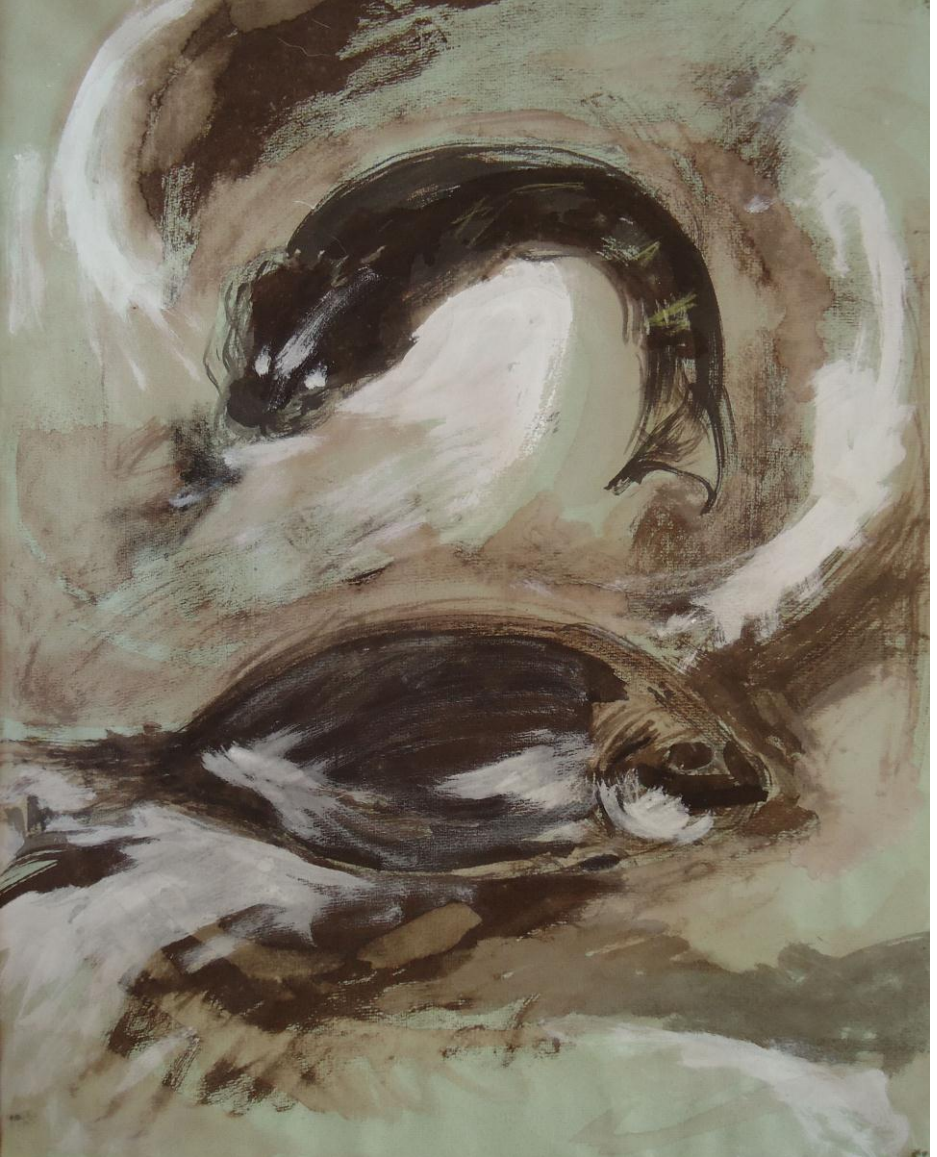


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Alternation

**Interdisciplinary Journal for the Study of the
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Coastlines and Littoral Zones in South African Ecocritical Writing

Guest Editor
Hermann Wittenberg

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Editorial: Coastlines and Littoral Zones in South African Ecocritical Writing

Hermann Wittenberg

This volume represents scholarly articles based on papers delivered at the 8th 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 20th 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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Sea Changes, Dark Tides and Littoral States: Oceans and Coastlines in Post-apartheid South African Narratives

Meg Samuelson

Abstract

This article surveys representations of ocean and coastline in post-apartheid South African narratives, focusing on how they come to articulate a nation in and after transition. It finds that a restored sense of connection in the wake of the exceptional land a-part is one of the notable sea changes of the post-apartheid order as South Africa is re-imagined at the conjunction of Atlantic and Indian Oceans in the neoliberal global order, while various dark tides continue to transport and haunt the post-apartheid imagination. Some narratives plumb the ocean depths in search of metaphors of literariness, conceive of it as housing memory or evoke the littoral to imagine anti-dualist states. Others emphasise the sea as a ‘material space of nature’ or suggest it summons ways of knowing that accommodate the mystery abjected and repressed by the enlightenment rationality that docked on South African shores during the long colonial encounter.

Keywords: South African literature, ocean histories, sea metaphors, ecological discourse

The sea speaks in many voices to articulate a nation in and after transition¹. This article surveys some of its notable tones and discourses in various

¹ The allusion is of course to Braudel’s ‘The Mediterranean Speaks with many Voices’ (1972:13).

fictional and (auto)biographical narratives representing ocean and coastline in post-apartheid South Africa. Taking my initial bearings from Ariel's song in *The Tempest*, I engage in particular the transformative and transforming character of the sea, finding it a medium eminently suited to the expression of change – whether of discourses of nation or those of the sea itself – while accommodating in its depths the 'rich and strange' (Shakespeare 1. 2. 402).

A restored sense of connection in the wake of the exceptional state of the land a-part is one of the notable sea changes of the post-apartheid order; others are conveyed in the dark tides that transport and haunt the post-apartheid imagination. This dark tide bespeaks also the meeting along South African shores of the 'black Atlantic' and the 'black water' ('*kala pani*') of the Indian Ocean: re-imagined at the site of their imbrications, the nation takes on new conceptual forms, or reanimates earlier ones abandoned under the urgencies of apartheid, while past structures of oppression and displacement, or memories thereof, seep across the temporal rupture posited in the 'post' into a disavowing present.

Conjugating local and global in expressions of a new post-apartheid worldliness, many narratives reassert the sea's social function as a transport surface connecting distant and dispersed landmasses, or evoke the oceanic ontology of connectedness (cf. Mack 2011: 37). Others plumb the ocean depths in search of metaphors of literariness or conceive of it as housing memory – as an alternative archive of the variety imagined by the St Lucian poet, Derek Walcott. Walcott's famous formulation – 'the sea is history' (1986) – refuses the binary of historical land versus ahistorical ocean that informs the conception of the sea as smooth surface that, in the wake of Hugo Grotius's *mare liberum* treatise, imagines it lying outside of human sociality and external to human law: a vast, boundless void (cf. Mack 2011: 16; Steinberg 2001: 14). The reclamation of the sea as a location of human history can, however, deny or repress other ways of reading it. As Philip Steinberg reminds us, though certainly a 'socially constructed space', the ocean 'is also a material space of nature' (2001: 209). Walcott's refusal is accordingly extended beyond the category of the human in engagements with littoral zones as sites of anti-dualist thinking (cf. Martin 2005), or in the pantheon of sea-creatures that populate post-apartheid fiction and demand a reading of the ocean as living presence. Insisting that the emergent 'blue

cultural studies' be like the ocean itself tinted 'green', such narratives dive beneath the sea as surface of travel and/or reflective mirror to find in its depths far more than an archive of human history. At the same time, while the black sea is rendered a sign of ecological crisis, the dark tides that muddy the littoral zone and the murky waters of the deep – a region that 'has withheld its secrets more obstinately than any other' (Carson 1961:n.p.) – summon ways of knowing that accommodate the 'strange': the mystery abjected and repressed by the (early to post) enlightenment rationality that docked on South African shores during the long colonial encounter.

Evoking the sea as surface over which human history advances, a number of post-apartheid novels revisit Cape Town's origins as 'tavern of the seas' and 'oceanic crossroads' within the imperial network of the Dutch East India Company (Ward 2003). On this historical stage they re-enact the encounter between autochthon and seafarer, while shifting from the conceptual dominance of the 'black Atlantic' (Gilroy 1993) to a re-articulation of South Africa at the intersection of Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds. The imaginative purchase of the Atlantic Ocean remains palpable in South African letters; but increasing attention is being paid to the nation's other flanking ocean, and the diverse elsewhere to which it connects, producing in the process new geopolitical and cultural imaginings.

This sea change enables us to 'relativize the Atlantic' model that, as Isabel Hofmeyr (2010: 721) notes, has become overly 'normative' in southern African studies, leading to particular conceptual occlusions. No longer exclusively fixated on the Euro-American dominated and driven histories that have produced the Atlantic world, it allows for a critical reorientations from which to begin reading what some are describing as the 'post-American' world (Zackaria 2011) or 'Asian century' (Kaplan 2010). While providing an illuminating vantage point on the emergent, this sea change also urges re-readings of earlier work previously engaged through the analytic lens of the 'black Atlantic', which re-emerge as negotiating a worldliness poised or pivoting between Atlantic and Indian Ocean arenas. A compelling example is provided by Peter Abrahams's *Tell Freedom* (1954). Explicit in its Atlantic references and modes of redress and to date read

within that rubric, *Tell Freedom* also surfaces various Indian Ocean entanglements, not least in the figures of Abrahams's parents – an Ethiopian seaman and a 'member of the Cape Coloured community' produced in 'the Cape of Storms ... where a half-way house to the East' was established (1954: 10 - 11) – and most powerfully in its final sequence, in which the autobiographical protagonist wades into the Indian Ocean off the shores of Durban one night, nearly drowning in its currents before he embarks by ship the next day on his journey to 'tell freedom'.

Such complex forms of worldliness imagined through the connective tissue of the oceans are opened up once more post apartheid. No longer conceptualized as a state of exception and a land apart, nor simply as an extension of the Atlantic economy, South Africa after apartheid comes to inhabit a connectedness inflected by its emergence into the neoliberal global economy following the end of the cold war. The sea looms large in narrative negotiations of this new state, whether in dystopian futures, contemporary crime thrillers or novels trawling the historical past.

Dan Sleight's *Islands* (2004) and Russel Brownlee's *Garden of Plagues* (2005), for instance, bring into central focus the sea, 'that player on the Cape stage ... so readily overlooked' (Sleight 2004: 385), as they write the seventeenth century Cape settlement into an archipelagic framework that, paradoxically, departs from the 'notoriously insular' (Worden 2003: 42) historiography of the Cape, and of South Africa more generally, in favour of rendering it a 'node' in the 'fluid state' of the Dutch East India Company network (Ward 2009, Brownlee 2005: 17). The context in which the occupation of the Cape occurs is the 'shift of historical existence from firm land to the sea' that for Karl Schmitt (1997: 46) defines the early modern era. Sleight emphasises this 'surge towards the sea' (Schmitt 1997: 19) in his cast of characters who wash up on the shores of the Cape like so much flotsam, each having 'heeded the voices from the sea that swept through Europe, calling farmers from their lands, clerks from their desks and bakers from their ovens' (Sleight 2004: 74). Hailed from all corners of the Atlantic world are a 'motley crew' (Gordon) of characters: 'I had to go to the sea, the sea had to have me' (Sleight 2004: 304), says Hans Michiel from Germany; captured in Timbuktu by Arabs and sold to Portuguese traders on the West African coast, the slave Jan Vos similarly reports that the 'sea called me from far ahead; it wanted me. I had to go' (326).

Reflecting on the emergence of modern South Africa as an encounter between land and sea, *Islands* initially performs a bifurcated gaze, shifting between the perspectives of the indigenous and the seafaring, between those whose eyes are turned toward the interior and those who look out across the ocean. In this, it follows the historical understanding put forward by Kerry Ward (2003) that ‘the orientation of indigenous societies in the region was not towards the sea’; even those called ‘*strandlopers*’ (lit. ‘beach-walkers’) ‘were not a people whose myths and economic being was shaped by the sea’. *Islands*, however, troubles this distinction between terrestrial and maritime, indigenous and interloper, showing how the founding of the settlement rather than the indigenous gaze draws the boundary between the land and sea. Here it echoes the Schmittian thesis that ‘the emergence of a (Eurocentric) global order’ founded ‘the new distribution of our planet ... in the separation of land from sea’; the former are divided into state territories while the latter ‘are free: they know no state and are not subjected to any state of territorial sovereignty’ (Schmitt 1997: 46).

Similarly to Ishtiyaq Shukri in *The Silent Minaret* (2005), what Sleigh seeks to recover from the early Cape encounter are in contrast amphibian or littoral subjects who embody what Michael Pearson describes as ‘a mixture of maritime and terrestrial influences’ (2006: 354). For Sleigh, Pieternella, the daughter of Krotoa and Pieter van Meerhoff and thus the product of the first marriage between African and European at the Cape, exemplifies this new subjectivity. It is one that stands athwart the borders first materialised in the Bitter Almond Hedge of Jan van Riebeeck’s Cape settlement and subsequently avidly policed by Dutch East India Company and Dutch/British colonial orders. For *Islands*, the elaboration of this state that in turn casts Pieternella as ‘*baster*’ (Sleigh 2004: 747) is rendered in the recession of the sea from the edges of the settlement, and the drying out of the land. Writing against the impermeable, ordered fortress city of twenty-first century Cape Town, Henrietta Rose-Innes redeploys this symbolic vocabulary in *Nineveh* (2011), where she evokes the ambiguous frog, wetlands and mud as subversive emblems against this settled state.

A different historical stage is set for the encounter between autochthon and seafaring stranger in the mid nineteenth century Eastern Cape in Zakes Mda’s *The Heart of Redness* (2000). Here the sea is overdetermined: its waves are said to have cast ‘the cursed white conquerors

... onto the lands of the amaXhosa' and the successful fulfillment of Nongqawuse's prophecies would have seen the European interlopers driven back to sea; at the same time, the prophecies portend that the ancestors will 'emerge from the sea' (Mda 2000: 87, 94). The prophecies remain unfulfilled and the dead do not rise to return the world to its original, uncontaminated state, yet the novel appears to draw out of Nongqawuse's legacy an otherwise much submerged indigenous orientation toward the sea. In the post-apartheid present, the character Camagu is surprised to find women harvesting mussels and oysters, a practice that dates back to the days of Nongqawuse when, after the failure of the prophecies, starving survivors began to 'eat shellfish, which was not regarded as food at all' (2000: 212). Thus does the novel advance its thesis that the 'amaXhosa are not a museum piece. Like all cultures their culture is dynamic' (2000: 286). The co-operative society Camagu forms with the women sea-harvesters in turn becomes the cornerstone of his vision for the village: to preserve its autonomy and sustain its resources for local use while simultaneously inserting it into the global economy (cf. 2000: 59).

In the final pages of the novel, the two narrative threads – set respectively in the time of the prophets and in the post-apartheid present – become entangled along the littoral. Two Qukezwas – one from the time of the prophets, the other her present-day descendent – try to entice their sons, both named Heitsi, to enter the sea. The first Qukezwa returns to her Khoikhoi heritage, becoming a 'strandloper' following the failure of the prophecies, while her son reveals 'some aversion to the sea' (2000: 317). The second also unsuccessfully seeks to introduce her son to the ocean: 'Oh, this Heitsi! He is afraid of the sea. How will he survive without the sea? How will he carry out the business of saving his people? Qukezwa grabs him by his hand and drafts him into the water. He is screaming and kicking wildly. ... 'No, mama! No! This boy does not belong in the sea! This boy belongs in the man village!'" (2000: 319-20). Although taking readers to shipwreck sites that materialize the sea as archive, the novel, gendering heritage as female and the national future as male (cf. Samuelson 2007: 71) and having established a strong association between women and the sea, ultimately reinstates the binary of historical land versus unhistorical sea.

Further complicating the binary of seafaring settlers versus sons of the soil by recalling the historical ocean that effects the most devastating sea change – one in which a young girl is remade as commodity – is Yvette

Christiansë's *Unconfessed* (2006). The slave ship that transports Sila from the Cape functions as a 'factory', producing 'the commodity called "slave" to advance the "accumulation of capital"' (Rediker 2008: 44, 45). Sila recalls the voyage with an evocative turn of phrase: 'the world tilted and we were scooped up like so many coins from the edge of a table' (Christiansë 2006: 324). Yet if the sea is here the site of inconsolable loss, it is simultaneously figured as medium through which are ferried 'survivals of cultural practices' (Harries 2005: 92), such as ancestor veneration, that render the boundary between the living and the dead as permeable as that between land and sea.

Zoë Wicomb's ocean is equally ambiguous: *David's Story* (2000) critiques the refusal of nineteenth century Griqua leader Andrew Le Fleur to acknowledge the entanglement of his indigenous Khoikhoi origins with those of his European ancestors 'from across the waters' and the slaves transported on 'ships from Madagascar and Malaya' (2000: 52, 88). But Wicomb does not sentimentalise the sea or deny the claims of the land-born. Revealingly, the first glimpse of the sea offered in the novel is one in which Sarah Bartmann appears on 'the mirror smoothness of the ocean', her 'delicate face severed' from her 'vast buttocks' (2000: 38). Even as the sea in this text troubles the politics of autochthony that produce their own forms of terror and violence, its surface reflects histories of racial terror and gender violence: echoes here of Paul Gilroy's (1993) post-national/post-racial project that yet depends on the memory of the middle passage. *David's Story* and Wicomb's later novel *Playing in the Light* (2006) both figure the sea as an archive of stories suppressed and drowned out by official narratives and a textual space able to articulate unspeakable loss, while writing towards littoral states and amphibian subjects.

The symbolic grammar structuring representations of the Indian Ocean passage to South Africa is equally muddy. Retraced in a series of family narratives are the routes through which Indian South Africans are transplanted into national soil. A new subject – of South Asia but translated by the ocean crossing – is forged on the *kala pani* ('black water'); such sea-changes raise questions about where India and South Africa begin and end, while locating national imaginings in transoceanic travel. This is allegorically rendered in Praba Moodley's *The Heart Knows No Colour* (2003), which opens in mid-ocean with the character Ganga in labour. Exemplary also are the novels *The Lotus People* (2002) and *The Revenge of*

Kali (2009) by Aziz Hassim; *Song of the Atman* (2006) by Ronnie Govender; and *The Wedding* (2001) by Imraan Coovadia (cf. Samuelson 2010). Extending across the eastern reaches of the Indian Ocean, Darryl Accone's auto/biography, *All Under Heaven: The Story of a Chinese Family in South Africa* (2005), mediates the author's sense of 'living in perpetual bifurcation' (Accone 2005b) by drawing China and South Africa into a shared narrative frame. The act of writing, of tracing the voyage out in reverse, becomes a form of return by the prodigal grandson, an expiation for past ancestral loss and displacement, yet one which turns east not in order to depart from South African shores, but rather to insert into the national narrative the bifurcated realities of those for whom 'Home is here, at the tip of Africa, but also across the sea' (Accone 2005b).

Seeping across borders and acting as connective tissue, the sea transports national subjects to and from various imagined homelands and points of departure and disembarkation. The post-isolation worldliness that it conceptually opens up is inflected by the neoliberal global order whose emergence coincided with or was the condition for that of the post-apartheid state. These new configurations of local and global are, as Jean and John Comaroff observe, suggestively encoded in and negotiated through crime fiction, an increasingly popular genre that in trawling the 'dark underside' of the postcolonial, post-totalitarian state of economic liberalisation (Comaroffs 2005: 2) provides a compelling imaginative vector for thinking through the relation between nation-state and global order. It is figured also through another global genre filled with local content (cf. Moretti 2000): cyberpunk. Some of the crime fiction written in and around Cape Town, in particular, returns to the coastal littoral on which was staged the meeting of autochthon and stranger. Such texts recast the shoreline as a theatre for thrillers of transnational trafficking that speak in a post-cold war register, anxiously reflecting on permeable national borders, while Lauren Beukes's *Moxyland* (2008) engages the state of 'liquid modernity' (Bauman 2000) in which post-apartheid South Africa seeks its bearings.

Crime thrillers such as Margie Orford's *Like Clockwork* (2006), Mike Nicol and Joanne Hichens's *Out to Score* (2006) and Andrew Brown's

Coldsleep Lullaby (2005) mark the sea and the rivers connecting it to the hinterland as sites of danger: strewn along the shore and river banks are clues through which to read the nation's relation to the transnational in an era of neoliberal global capital. Border anxieties are figured through the violated bodies of women and boys found in littoral sites (boathouses, dunes, rivers) as the novels articulate crime in the post-cold war register while the Cape Town seaboard, like the Mediterranean of which Iain Chambers writes, serves 'to underline the paranoia and amplify the moral panic that modern migration disseminates' (2008: 679).

At the same time, the littoral bespeaks the porosity between past and present as the city's origins as Company settlement are seen seeping into its present structures of corporate governance (cf. Samuelson forthcoming). *Moxyland* reveals this continuity by extending the Cape's foundational position as node in the Company network into the twenty-first century 'network society' that transforms the nation-state 'into an agent of global capital flows and of the global institutions that try to manage these flows' (Alexander 2001: 135). The unimpeded flows of 'liquid' capital across the city's ocean-like 'friction-free' surface (Steinberg 2001: 165) are signalled in the 'corporate line' that 'shushes through the tunnels on a skin of seawater, overflow from the tide drives put to practical use in the clanking watery bowels of Cape Town' (Beukes 2008: 1).

Out to Score dives into these bowels to tease out different threads of the South African story, starting with the exile from the sea of fishing communities under apartheid and inadequately redressed by the post-apartheid state, which it presents as fuelling abalone poaching in the postcolony. As the focalising PI Mullet is drawn deeper into a web of crime, he begins untangling two transnational syndicates flowing, respectively, along South-East and South-North axes and intersecting at the Cape. A Chinese Triad abalone poaching syndicate operates through the antagonist Jim Woo along the South-East axis, while the North-South axis channels clientele to Woo's elite 'urban hunting safari' for wealthy northern businessmen, who pay dearly for the opportunity to hunt street children (in a narrative shorthand that collapses the north-south flows into South Africa for (il)licit hunting safaris and the more submerged market in under-age sex tourism). This subplot renders visible the 'entanglements that tie postcolonial graft to the metropolitan scramble for tropical spoils' (Comaroffs 2005: 10)

and refuses a discourse of South African exceptionalism that, in this instance, functions not to isolate the country from its continental location, or its histories from those of other nodes in the Dutch East India Company network, but casts South Africa, and the postcolony more generally, as zones of lawlessness in contrast to an ordered, developed north. At the same time, the intersection of these two axes reveals the ways in which Cape Town's historic function as 'oceanic crossroads' continues to shape imaginings of both city and sea, while indexing the shift from a bi- to a multi-polar world order (cf. Zakaria 2011). '[R]oar[ing] and thrash[ing]' as they meet at the Cape, like the Atlantic and Indian Oceans (Wicomb 1987: 75), are various residual and emergent imaginaries.

Poised on the fulcrum of the Cape (cf. Mbembe *et al.* 2011), *Out to Score* reveals the staggering costs of the paradoxical interweaving of deregulated trade and quota systems that fail to recognize local claims on the sea: abalone breeding grounds face extinction while the crystal meth ('tik') that flows in along the South-East axis in return for this illicit harvest unravels the fabric of entire communities on the Cape Flats. Performed along the seashore, poaching produces ripple effects that infiltrate into communities exiled from the sea – an exile that this novel indicts for fuelling abalone poaching (cf. also Steinberg 2005). Endemic to South Africa shores, the abalone or perlemoen species *Haliotis midae* is under threat of extinction from transnational poaching rackets.

Southern Right whales, in contrast, migrate annually through the Pacific and Indian oceans, but their breeding patterns are site specific. Set in the breeding ground off Hermanus, Mda's *The Whale Caller* (2005) offers an extended reflection on human-animal relationships forged on this littoral as his Whale Caller enters into an erotic relationship with a Southern Right whale, Sharisha, whom he summons and courts with his kelp horn. As in other fiction, the sea holds a memory of violence – in this instance man's violence against his animal others that wafts ashore in a 'two-hundred-year-old stench' (Mda 2005: 18). The oceans inhabited and traversed by Sharisha are moreover in a state of degradation: during her annual migration, she has to brave ships' propellers, fishing gear entanglements and explosives from

oil explorations, among other hazards. While recalling the meeting of Atlantic and Indian trade routes at the Cape, Mda focuses on deep ocean crossings to challenge human exploitation of the sea's resources and of its surface as a medium for travel.

Sharisha's tragic end is a direct result of the human presence in and on the seas and of the overdevelopment of the shoreline. The sea's 'black ... rage' (279) against the town's tourist economy takes the form of a freak wave spewing 'flotsam' across the streets and destroying luxury sea-front accommodations. In this dark tide, Sharisha, 'mesmerized' by the Whale Caller's horn, cannot 'distinguish the blue depths from the green shallows' and crosses the line into the bay, beaching on the human-inhabited shore. Lacking an indigenous mythology of the sea through which to mediate the relationship between human and whale, the Whale Caller, in contrast to the Maoris in Witi Ihimaera's *The Whale Rider*, is unable to save her. While he insists that the Khoikhoi shared the Aborigines' love for Southern Rights, he claims they did not have their own stories to connect them to sea-life, or to negotiate the littoral zone and the human-animal crossings Julia Martin (2005) imaginatively locates along it. Such stories instead cross 'the vast Indian Ocean', and are imbibed by the Whale Caller during his wanderings along the coast: stories travel, but the novel suggests that only autochthonous ones have efficacy. While offering a keen ecological consciousness of the sea and its creatures, then, *The Whale Caller* unfolds in the register of the local and the located. Unlike Wicomb's *Playing in the Light*, with its evocative reference to the dugong as an invitation to the human subject to enter into enlivening travel beyond the 'far south' (Wicomb 2006: 186), it does not appropriate the sea-creature as a figure for human movement but rather articulates, in a different register, the border-anxieties engaged in crime fiction.

Whereas Mda presents an ultimately devastating communion between man and whale and concludes with an instructive turn away from the ocean that recalls the ending of *The Heart of Redness*, Ann Landsman's *The Rowing Lesson* (2007) takes as leitmotif the 'transitive' (Clingman 2009: 47) medium of the river, establishing various connections between land and sea; human and animal; the local and the global; and the unborn, the living and the dead. The second structuring motif of the novel is the coelacanth, the ovoviviparous Indian Ocean fish that shares a common ancestral branch with

land vertebrates, rendering visible the continuum between terrestrial and marine life. Restored to its rightful position as cradle of life on the ‘terraqueous globe’ (Cohen 2010a), the sea in this transitive novel is simultaneously a site and source of social history, as evident in its representations of Tweede Nuwejaar celebrations and songs such as ‘*Daar kom die Alibama*’.

This social history is recalled also in *Thirteen Cents*, K. Sello Duiker’s novelistic presentation of an abused and exploited child living on the streets of Cape Town. The sea is once more ambivalently cast as source of danger, contamination and predation and of protection, purification and strength. Late in the novel, Azure climbs Table Mountain, where he performs shamanistic trance dances and plays with fire, drawing on both autochthonous and transoceanic Cape histories prior or resistant to the colonial order – those of the Khoikhoi and escaped slaves. From the mountaintop, Azure, in an apocalyptic vision, watches the ‘unsettling’ spectacle of ‘the sea coming alive’ (Duiker 2000: 162). The deluge destroys the town that has accommodated his abuse, just as it accommodated and depended on the exploitation and destruction of indigenous Khoikhoi and imported slaves, and Table Mountain returns to its prior state as ‘Hoerikwaggo’ (‘Sea-Mountain’). Land and sea are drawn together within the indigenous perspective, but for Azure in this post-apartheid present from which there is no return, the effects of this conjunction are terrifying and compound his sense of loss.

Gordimer’s ‘Loot’ (2003) also evokes a deluge to render visible hidden histories. The story opens with an earthquake so powerful that it ‘tipped a continental shelf’ (Gordimer 2004: 3). Rather than flooding the land, the sea pulls back to expose ‘[t]he most secret level of our world’ before the tsunami strikes, claiming the treasure seekers who rushed forward in an orgy of looting. In conclusion the story alludes to *The Tempest* and the ‘sea-change’ (2004: 4) of the imagination – pushing it beyond political allegory, and suggesting the limitations of attempts to know the past through non-protean registers. Readers are urged not to join the deadly search for self-identity, looting the sea or the ocean floor for confirming reflective surfaces and transparent allegorical meanings, but are instead enjoined to negotiate the alterity of the submarine world and of the literary imagination itself.

Another sea-change is referenced in the natural disaster that drives this story, as well as that of *The Whale Caller* – the kind that oceanographer and environmentalist Sylvia Earle documents in *Sea-Change* (1995) and *The World is Blue* (2009) in which the source of life on the planet, already punctuated with ‘dead zones’, is transforming into a plastic soup (cf. also Roberts 2007). Acknowledging and averting this condition requires in turn a sea-change in conceptions of the ocean. As Earle notes, ‘Deeply rooted in human culture is the attitude that the ocean is so vast, so resilient, it shouldn’t matter how much we take out of – or put into – it’. From Grotius’s claim to the ‘freedom of the seas’ that underwrote the Dutch occupation of the Cape in the seventeenth century to the Romantic imagination of the boundless ocean extends what Earle (2009: n.p.) describes as ‘the presumption that the ocean was an inexhaustible resource’; that it was, in Grotius’s terms, ‘limitless’ (1916: 28)².

Patricia Schonstein’s *The Master’s Ruse* (2008) engages the consequent and increasingly urgent condition of the seas while reflecting on literary production against the backdrop of a repressive regime that has joined ‘the global military federation’, produced *Homo guerre* – a humankind who no longer hold in their bones the ‘memory of fish and marine cartilage’ (Schonstein 2008: 6) – and effected the ‘death of the ocean ... by overfishing and ... the endless, indiscriminate dumping of military and industrial waste’ (2008: 4). The ‘black ocean’ (2008: 51) that fills the void left by the previously spiralling and enlivening gyres suggestively references the ‘black Atlantic’ and the *kala pani* (‘black water’) traversed by subjects in bondage in previous centuries while articulating the looming environmental crisis of the present³. Significantly, this destructive regime pits itself also

² Lawrence Buell (2001) notes at the start of this century ‘how swiftly the dominant image of the sea shifted ... from inexhaustibleness to fragility’.

³ On reading this movement in terms of global problematics, see Buell (2005): ‘WEB Du Bois predicted that the great public issue of the twentieth century would be the problem of the color line. In the century just begun, that problem shows no sign of abating. But ultimately a still more pressing question may prove to be whether planetary life will remain viable for most of the earth’s inhabitants without major changes in the way we live now’.

against literature – purging intellectuals, burning books and banning writers. Literariness, then, is associated with the ‘vibrant and pulsing’ sea that once ‘spiraled and plunged colourfully around the globe in hot and cold currents, forming unpolluted gyres as they met, dancing, then moving on to caress the outer edges of the land’ (2008: 5). Now, however, ‘the ocean is ... forlornly moving between the land masses, searching for lost meaning’ (2008: 5)⁴.

The environmental crisis articulated through the sign of the ‘dark tide’ evokes a different response in *The Master’s Ruse* to that proposed by *The Whale Caller*: here regeneration is shown to lie not in a human retreat from the sea but rather in a protean literariness that, written from the ‘marine cartilage’ of embodied human memory, resurfaces a deep relationship between human and ocean. Schonstein’s narrator starts ‘working on plots to undermine the regime’ (2008: 143). At first she is inspired by the belief in a messiah, who ‘will be fetched from ‘the other side’ by a griot, a story teller ... to bring freedom to the oppressed’ and ‘restore the oceans’. But she is cautioned that ‘the very concept of messianic energy required betrayal’ (2008: 60). When she tries again, ‘a second energy intruded. It too was messianic... It had to do with water. It had to do with flood and fury’. This force, she reflects, ‘use[s] the oceans’ to ‘redeem the earth from human dominion’. As in the vision that concludes *Thirteen Cents*, it ‘creates tsunamis, which slammed the shorelines, tossing dolosse aside and pouring through coastal cities and towns. They engulfed skyscrapers and highways, drowning their human prey in the very oils and solvents that had brought about oceanic demise’ (2008: 123). Yet, confesses Schonstein’s narrator, echoing Azure: ‘I am afraid of the storm I am afraid of the sea bursting and drowning *all life*. I am afraid of the black waves’ (2008: 125). When the ocean is *used* once more, even to cleanse the earth, it threatens rather than sustains life.

⁴ Schonstein’s lyrical descriptions of the ocean gyres match those of Rachel Carson’s *The Sea around Us*. While initially stressing the ‘vastness’ and ‘changeless eternity’ of the sea, Carson’s ode to the ocean was updated with a preface on reissue in 1961 to draw attention to the ways in which the sea has ‘invited the attention of those who have the problem of disposal’ rendering it a ‘dumping ground’ and site for military tests.

Emerging ‘shaken from these apocalyptic torrents’ (2008: 125), the authorial figure does not write the envisaged novel with its messianic and Judas figures, nor the haunting ‘vision of the bursting oceans’, but rather a love poem to the terraqueous globe. This, ultimately, is the role carved out for literature: to ‘create the absolute of beauty with which to open the collective unconscious and instil peace therein ... to extinguish ignorance and break the cycle of war ... to end regimes and their concurrent genocides’ (2008: 132). As she casts her imagination ‘afloat upon a pristine ocean vital and alive with fish and water creatures’, the narrator realises that ‘the eulogy, the poem itself, the poem of love, was the messiah’ (2008: 133). Salvation, the novel suggests, will not come from the sea; rather, it falls to art to salvage the sea – to protect its ecological diversity and cherish rather than puncture the veil of unknowability that mocks the pretensions of post-enlightenment rationality.

A mere 5% of the ocean depths are mapped, measured and known (cf. Earle 2009)⁵. Even while subject to the exploitative relations ferried to the Cape along with the cartographical imperative on the fleets that follow Bartholomew Diaz’s caravels, the excess – the remaining 95% – cannot be conveyed in the scientific register and instead, as Schonstein presents it, find their voice in literary art. On this point, *The Master’s Ruse* finds itself in agreement with *The Whale Caller* and other narratives such as *Garden of the Plagues*. The enlightenment project of domination over nature and other humans (cf. Adorno & Horkheimer, in Cohen 2010b: 55) that Brownlee presents arriving at the Cape in the late seventeenth century is in these texts confounded by the excess of the sea and its denizens even as it exposes its limits.

The whale, in particular, becomes a sign of the ‘ocean’s mysterious, radical, ambiguous otherness’ (Buell 200: n.p.) as well as of its bounded and

⁵ Earle’s *The World is Blue*, similarly to Carson’s earlier study, unwittingly reveals the extent to which scientific knowledge production on the ocean is complicit in and dependent on the military and extractionist processes that now clearly threaten its future.

exhaustible state. In *Garden of the Plagues*, the ‘creeping horror’ of the ‘dark ocean’ that the ‘Men of Science’ seek to stop up beaches on the shores of the Cape in the body of whale (Brownlee 2005: 182, 50). They ‘dismember it ... count the tons of its flesh and number its bones’ and proclaim that ‘In the end we have the whole of it there in our barrels. We have the sum of this whale, and there is nothing at all that can be said to be missing’ (2005: 66 - 67); yet, bemoans the narrator, having ‘abstracted ourselves from the world of the nameless gargantuan and the holy terrors’ we ‘yearn to find a way back in. Something is there, something missing whose name we cannot say’ (2005:100). Similarly, in Mda’s conclusion, the ‘rational explanation provided by scientists’ regarding Sharisha’s fate ‘is demonstrably inadequate’ (Huggan & Tiffin 2009: 199). Seeking other voices in and of the sea, these texts surface ways of knowing that turn back from the construction of the world as ‘a curiosity, a thing separate from ourselves that can be subjected to experiment, named, described, and claimed as a possession’ (Brownlee 2005: 99).

Ultimately, the ‘unnatural history of the sea’ (Roberts 2007) shows up the limits of this world-view. The whale hunts Mda recalls ‘lubricated the wheels of industry’ (Roberts 2007: 87, 95), which in turn soon produced the ‘Anthropocene Age’ in which humans have become a force of nature, a geological force, no longer able to maintain the conceit of holding themselves apart from the natural world (cf. Chakrabarty 2009). The breaching of whales into these texts further collapses the binary between human and nature, or human and non-human animals, so fundamental to (post)enlightenment rationality. If whales today continue to seem ‘uncannily other’, notes Lawrence Buell, this uncanniness is ‘increasingly seen to reside in the ‘fact’ that despite dramatic differences in scale and autonomy and habitat they are so much like us’ (2001: n.p.), as *The Whale Caller* dramatises in its plot of repressed maternal memories and trans-species sexual enrapture.

If (post)enlightenment rationality conceives the sea ‘as a *great void* outside society’ or its ‘wild antithesis’, and accordingly casts it as an arena in which ‘to test and affirm its own level of civilization, whether through annihilating the marine ‘other’ or through scientifically analyzing it’, the deep sea, as Steinberg notes, offered forms of connectivity that saw it ‘idealized as an empty transportation surface’ (Steinberg 2001: 112, 113). Advancing new visions of the oceans and of the nation around whose shores

the Atlantic and Indian meet, this set of narratives, when read together, demand a bifocal lens that both gazes across this surface, appreciating the ‘centrifugal’ force of the sea (Cohen 2010b: 11) and the global currents that comprise the local, while apprehending the life – and death – beneath it.

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The Sea Close By: The Coastal Diaries of Albert Camus, Athol Fugard and Stephen Watson

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Abstract

In reading passages about the southern African coastline from Athol Fugard's *Notebooks 1960-1977* (1983) and Stephen Watson's *A Writer's Diary* (1997), I hope to explore how and why these writers are drawn to the figure of Albert Camus. Much of this Nobel laureate's *oeuvre* – his *Carnets* and in particular his lyrical essays like 'Nuptials at Tipasa' and 'The Wind at Djemila' – returns to an Algerian coastline of similar latitude, light and climate to that of the Cape Peninsula; so too he writes out of a vexed political context which speaks to the situation of the liberal-humanist literary imagination in southern Africa. The 'invincible summer' instilled by his Algerian upbringing was something which Camus imagined as the core of his creative being; yet how does a similar celebration of physicality, the body and 'the sensual intelligence' play out when relocated from a northern to a southern African coastline? In answering this, I hope to suggest how the diary form – a neglected and supposedly minor mode on the margins of 'literature' – is able to show with a particular power the ways in which natural, social and personal histories come to be braided together in a postcolony like South Africa.

Keywords: Albert Camus, Athol Fugard, Stephen Watson, diary as literary form.

On 12 July 1996, midway through his *A Writer's Diary*, the Cape Town poet, critic and essayist Stephen Watson pauses to consider 'those who, without

being attached to anything like a weather bureau, keep a daily record of the weather, its changes, variations, apparent duplications’:

I imagine there must be moments when they ask themselves what all their annotations amount to Today there is one feature which may be noteworthy; tomorrow another. Years pass. But still it doesn’t quite add up. It simply is what it is...

Writers, too, are little different from these amateur diarists of the climate, notating a world of insatiable flux. They too are forced to annotate the world over and over, hoping against hope that somehow, somewhere, one day, it will all add up; that instead of just the weather – all that is variable, never constant, never quite the same – there will be, on the page they’ve just written and abandoned, the world (Watson 1997: 126).

It is a passage which speaks wryly, and self-consciously, about the practice of diary-keeping: a long-term discipline of dispassionately logging the world set against the ingenuous, laughably partial nature of the individual entry; the combinations of settledness and flux that come, in Watson’s year long writing up of the Cape, to form the ‘inner weather’ of a text which knowingly blurs interior and external worlds, encoding each in terms of the other.

In southern Africa the diary as meteorological record carries with it, as we shall see, a long colonial history as a navigational and conceptual aid – first on sea, then on land – for apprehending the trackless, the unfamiliar, the other. Yet equally, despite being private, closeted and comparatively ‘unofficial’ archives, several historical diaries have proved compelling for a contemporary literary imagination¹ intent on re-presenting once obscure(d)

¹ Some examples would include: Sol Plaatje’s lost and then rediscovered Boer War journal (speculatively ‘finished’ by Andries Oliphant in ‘The Interpreter’, 1999); Olive Schreiner’s proto-feminist life-writing, which surely feeds into the ‘locked diary’ of J.M. Coetzee’s *In the Heart of the Country* (1977); the journals of Lady Anne Barnard and Susanna Smit that compel and frustrate the poetic imagination of Antjie Krog in equal measure; the *Dagregister* of Adam Tas, drawn on by several writers as a formative moment in Afrikaans culture.

lives, rediscovering the ordinary and, perhaps more elusively, evoking a different kind of temporality: an altered sense of how time passes, shapes and is shaped by writing. In the more recent diaries that I hope to explore here, intensely personal meditations on creative process co-exist with an attempt to log the everyday during times of major socio-political flux. And all of the above find figurative counterparts and shapes for understanding in the interplay of wind, tide, water and light along the southern African coastline.

Like Watson's record from one December to another across 1995 to 1996, the *Notebooks 1960/1977* of Athol Fugard are drawn repeatedly to the South African coastline. If *A Writer's Diary* is suffused with evocations of the Cape Peninsula, Fugard's journals read in one sense like a long meditation on the beaches, estuaries, tidal spars and mudflats near Port Elizabeth: almost every page carries depiction of a space that, given that there are some 3000 kilometres of it in total, remains a rather overlooked site in South African literary culture more generally.

Introducing *The Penguin Book of the Beach*, a 1996 anthology of short stories, Robert Drewe explores a similar situation in Australia, remarking that even though it is the world's largest island, with more than ninety per cent of its population living near the coast, 'the mythical qualities of its ocean shore have, until recently, been neglected in Australian literature':

The sensual intelligence tended to be distrusted or denied, viewed as mere hedonism or pantheism. Literature academics, though they rarely ventured there, favoured the dry, asexual, pragmatic myth of the bush and inland desert... At the same time, for at least the past three generations, the average Australian has been conducting a lifelong love affair with the beach (Drewe 2006: 6).

One might want to question this idea of 'the average Australian', and suggest that such a label is even less viable in southern Africa. But it certainly seems that from accounts of the colonial romance through to J.M. Coetzee and Marlene van Niekerk's fractured meditations on the African farm, 'the heart of the country' has compelled far more critical attention than the long inverted arc which forms the land/sea borderline of Africa South.

Even the growing interest in ‘black’ Atlantics or ‘blue’ cultural studies – those complex historical trajectories across oceans which form such a powerful means of thinking our way into transnational or world history – tends to pay attention to transport networks and nodes, shipping routes and (post)colonial ports, but is less concerned with the sea margin itself, and in particular those parts of it where the built environment thins out or is left behind. What would it mean to think about all those figures in the South African past and present gazing not towards arid hinterlands but turned instead to face the sea? *Strandlopers* and *seewagters*, castaways and prophetesses, prisoners, beachcombers, fishermen, swimmers, scientists, pilgrims, New Year’s Day revellers, holidaymakers, surfers and sunbathers
....

In exploring the ‘the sensual intelligence’ – its possibilities for literary fiction, but also the difficulties that it poses for a politically aware cultural criticism – Drewe is drawn, as are Fugard and Watson, to the work of Albert Camus. He quotes the 1958 Preface to the collection of early ‘lyrical essays’, *L’envers et l’endroit* (*Betwixt and Between* 1937; also translated as *The Wrong Side and the Right Side*):

Poverty, first of all, was never a misfortune for me: it was radiant with sunlight. Even my revolts were lit up by the sun To correct my natural indifference, I was placed half-way between poverty and the sun. Poverty prevented me from thinking that all is well under the sun and in history; the sun taught me that history is not everything (Camus 1970: 18).

From *L’étranger* (1942) through the *Carnets* (1962, 1965) to the unfinished, posthumously published manuscript of *Le premier homme* (1995), the work of this *piéd noir* become Nobel laureate provides a range of ‘intimate recognitions’ and encouragements for both the South African playwright and the poet (Watson 2010: 148). And their respective diaries leave one in no doubt as to the strength, and relief, of this identification: ‘Resumed reading Camus’s *Carnets*. I would be happy to spend the next ten years deepening my understanding and appreciation of this man’, Fugard writes in August 1963; and later in the year: ‘Impossible to describe the excitement, the total sympathy that exists for me with Camus’s thinking. In the harsh but lucid

world of his writing I seem to have found, for the first time, my true climate' (1983: 94, 105)².

Watson's engagement with Camus is most explicit in the long essay, six years in the writing, which forms the centrepiece of *The Music in the Ice* (2010), the collection of critical and personal pieces published shortly before his death. But it stretches back through his diaries and criticism to his first collection of poetry, *In this City* (1986), which takes a line from Camus's essay 'Return to Tipasa' (1954) as its epigraph:

Yes, there is beauty and there are the humiliated. Whatever may be the difficulties of the undertaking I should like never to be unfaithful either to the second or the first³.

It is, like the piece quoted by Drewe, one of many aphoristic, even gnomic formulations by the French writer in which the claims of a world that is both intensely physical and intensely unjust are placed in a taut and difficult dialogue. It suggests too how the range of analogues between north and south Africa offered by his writing are at once both political *and* geographical.

The Mediterranean coastline that Camus returns to throughout his life is, in terms of its latitude and climate, is a kind of topographic double or mirror image of the littoral zone that Fugard and particularly Watson are drawn to: the shifting combinations of light, wind, swimmers, saltwater and cold ocean currents, the 'life that tastes of warm stone' in which his prose luxuriates (Camus 1970: 72). Yet at the same time, the acrimonious debates

² Given the almost talismanic significance which certain of Camus's formulations seem to have held for Fugard in the mid-1960s, it is unsurprising that Russell Vandenbroucke's 1986 monograph on the playwright takes its title from the essay 'Summer in Algiers': 'Between this sky and the faces looking up to it there is nothing on which to hang a mythology, a literature, an ethic or a religion; only stones, flesh, stars and those *truths the hand can touch*' (1970: 89, e.a.).

³ The lines appear translated slightly differently in *Selected Essays and Notebooks*, trans. Philip Thody: 'Whatever difficulties the enterprise may present ...' (1970: 153). All quotations from Camus taken from this edition unless otherwise stated.

about ‘formalist’ versus ‘committed’ writing, or ‘revolutionary’ versus ‘aesthetic’ poetics which dominated South African literary culture in the 1970s and 80s find an echo in Camus’s increasingly embattled liberalism as decolonisation unfolded in Francophone Africa. As the historian Tony Judt writes, although with hindsight Camus seems to have negotiated a uniquely honourable path through the ideological pressures of twentieth-century life as a public intellectual, his rejection of violence and terror in all its forms ‘reduced him to impotent silence at the height of the Algerian civil war and rendered him inaccessible to the generation that followed’ (2009: 98)⁴.

The result is a distinctive, unsettling poetics, both seductive and possibly suspect: sunlit wellbeing co-exists with relentless poverty; richly embodied sensuality risks tipping into mere cultural vacancy; stylistic lucidity is married to Sisyphean absurdity. I will hold such ebbs and flows in mind while considering the varied literary trajectories of Watson and Fugard as they explore their respective regions as ‘extremes of social nightmare and geographical dream’ (Anderson 2011: 18). And I hope to suggest that it is the diary, a neglected and supposedly ‘minor form on the periphery of literature’ (Watson 1997: vii) that is able to show with a particular power the ways in which natural, social and personal histories come to be braided together in the tragically delayed postcolony that is South Africa. More generally then, I approach such ‘littoral zones’ as a means of thinking through the possibility, but also the difficulty, of bringing into dialogue those modes of reading and writing that might broadly be termed ‘postcolonial’ and ‘ecocritical’.

Writing Up, Writing Off: Diaries, Dead Reckoning and Day-registers

Both Fugard’s and Watson’s are quite explicitly *writer’s* diaries, in the narrow sense: the workbook of a writer who imagines his or her main practice to be going on elsewhere, and in other forms. Yet for a certain kind of reader, such supposedly peripheral or supplementary texts may come to

⁴ For a detailed account of Camus’s vexed career as political commentator and public intellectual, as well as his bruising clash with Sartre, see Judt’s long essay on ‘The Reluctant Moralists: Albert Camus and the Discomforts of Ambivalence’ (1998: 87 - 135).

hold just as much interest as the main body of the *oeuvre*. And not, I would suggest, simply because of voyeurism or a small-minded fascination with the prosaic.

Introducing a selection from Coleridge's *Notebooks*, Seamus Perry remarks that journalism and notebook entries, in being occasional and impermanent forms, 'enablingly slackened his self-imposed expectations' (2002: viii). As a reader who has always found such notebooks a more engaging, accessible and ultimately more acute form of knowledge than the self-consciously 'literary' prose of the *Biographia Literaria*, I am receptive to the idea that it was this descendant of the 'commonplace book' – with its abrupt shifts from high to low registers, its aleatoric or serendipitous logic, and its 'unplanned, unfolding, various existence' – which 'allowed his multiform genius its natural outlet' (2002: viii).

It is this sense of marginal and liminal written modes – genres, styles and registers positioned slightly aslant to publicly imposed or privately internalised expectations – that I hope to retain in a postcolony where, as I have argued elsewhere, the literary text is subject to an unusually intense and premature pressure to be *written up*. 'South Africa' – often imagined in grandiose and incorrigibly allegorical terms as a 'concentration of world history' or a 'hemispheric seam' – has produced countless texts which tend to resolve (or be resolved) into a fixed, transportable set of meanings intended for global consumption⁵. In this context I am interested in whether the ongoing and localised practice of diary-keeping might offer more unusual and unexpected shapes for thought.

In the most compelling examples of this kind of life-writing – from Coleridge through to Virginia Woolf or, say, the *Journals* of John Cheever –

⁵ The quoted phrases are from Derrida (1986: 337) and Mostert (1992: xv) respectively. In a more general discussion of non-fictional modes and their genealogies in South African literary history, I use the phrase *writing up* in two senses: 'firstly to evoke figure of the foreign correspondent (or any writing outsider) filing a report for a distant audience, a report often registering the pressure of the exotic or ethnographic; and secondly to suggest how texts from South Africa often register a (premature) pressure to resolve into a fixed, transportable set of meanings: to be (too quickly) *finished up*, that is, or *sewn up*' (Twidle 2012: 18 - 19).

one is able to experience the daily *bricolage* produced as a wide-ranging intellectual life interacts with materials immediately to hand. In 1830, Emerson, dissatisfied with the didactic, monotone address of the sermon ('no arrows, no axes, no nectar, no growling') found a metaphor for the kind of cultural criticism he wished to practice after seeing the 'panharmonicon' being toured by the German con artist, Johann Maelzel. As David Shields describes in *Reality Hunger* (2010), when demonstrating this 'organ without keys', Maelzel 'would crank its heavy silver lever three times and step off to the side, and the machine would spit out an entire orchestra's worth of sound: flutes, drums, trumpets, cymbals, trombones, a triangle, clarinets, violins':

After seeing Maelzel's machine perform, Emerson called the new literature he'd been looking for 'a panharmonicon. Here everything is admissible – philosophy, ethics, divinity, criticism, poetry, humour, fun, mimicry, anecdote, jokes, ventriloquism – all the breadth and versatility of the most liberal conversation, highest and lowest personal topics: all are permitted, and all may be combined into one speech' (2010: 16).

If much academic literary criticism in the last half century has operated in the shadow of Michel Foucault's panopticon – with its metaphors of power, disciplining and subjection – then perhaps the panharmonicon registers (as the reception of Shields's book testifies) an appetite for broader, more public and perhaps less predictable sense of what cultural criticism might be: criticism as autobiography, discursive essay, travelogue, or a creative response which blurs all the above. All are modes which may well have been *written off* as mere belle-lettrism in the ideologically charged debates of the 1970s and 80s. But when approached today, they may well serve as descriptions of the kind of deeply empathetic (and unashamedly humanist) response to literary precursors that characterises the approach of Camus, Fugard and Watson.

But if the diary form is in one sense uniquely open to the world, it is also often closed, locked, secret, or at least uncertain of its status with regard to a wider social body: whether it should be public, publicised, published (the kind of internal debate that generates the split personae, and pages, of

Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year*). It can offer a space for thinking that is more obscure and lonely, but also safer and more experimental. If the mode signifies in one sense the comic ordinariness that Watson remarks on in discussing those 'amateur diarists of flux', in literary history (or at least, literary mythology) the writer's diary often exists under the sign of the aberrant and unusual: a series of (posthumously discovered) writerly experiments with alternate selves (Fernando Pessoa's *Book of Disquiet*); the unbearable, unreadable or destroyed (Gide on Wilde, Sylvia Plath's last journal); the unconscious (Kafka, Graham Greene's 'dream diaries'); the radically displaced (Gombrowicz in Argentina); the ungenerous or unsayable within one's own lifetime (Malinowski; Cheever).

Finally, as a sustained record and personal archive, it can be a space where thoughts and ideas might mature for much longer before being released into the world. And in an increasingly hyperlinked world, with the kind of instantaneous self-broadcasting now enabled by the internet, one might even ask whether it is a form that has come very quickly to seem impossibly outmoded and old-fashioned, almost a kind of literary relic. Set back from a digital world of blogging, live feeds and comment forums, the handwritten diary stands as a long and private record of built-in obsolescence⁶.

Yet of course, in a place like South Africa (as in so many parts of the world), the diary is also an explicitly colonial form. Any genealogy of the mode must eventually lead one back (via countless texts by missionaries, administrators, ethnographers, travellers and natural historians) to the foundational text of settler-colonialism in South Africa: what is normally called the *Daghregister* or Journal of Jan van Riebeeck, even though not a single word of it was written by the first (reluctant) Commander of the Dutch garrison at the Cape. Instead we have a document sometimes dictated by him, sometimes chronicling his actions in the third person, and sometimes composed in his absence: kind of collective, political unconscious of the early station that has been repeatedly, almost obsessively, drawn on by social

⁶ I have in mind here the remarks of Philip French who, in his work on V.S. Naipaul, suggested that it might be 'the last literary biography to be written from a complete paper archive' (2008: xiii).

historians, poets, historical novelists seeking to re-imagine the past⁷. Yet this master document of settlement – at first remarkably precarious, then aggressively expansionist – can be pushed back even further, dislodged from its claims to the land and run backward into the impermanence and tracklessness of the open ocean.

In an outline of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) writing system, Adrien Delmas shows how the *daghregister* was first and fundamentally a nautical form. In the 15th and 16th centuries, as Portuguese and then Dutch ships began to explore the *volta da mar largo* (the ‘diversion to the deep sea’ which enabled the passing of the doldrums and the rounding of the Cape) coastal landmarks could no longer be relied upon. New techniques of open-sea navigation had to be developed on voyages where latitude could be measured with astrolabe or sextant but longitude, which required accurate chronometers, could not be calculated. As such, all navigators on board ship were compelled to adopt the practice of *gegist bestek*, or ‘dead reckoning’, in which the pilot would write down the observed course and estimated distance of the ship on a daily basis (if not more frequently) so as to make an educated guess about the position of the vessel. In Pedro de Medina’s, *Arte de Navegar*, published at Valladolid in 1545, he described how the navigator

... must be well prepared for long journeys and have a register of his journey, where he records the wind that he uses every day and in which way: and also how fast his ship can sail, checking with the clock how many leagues per hour it covers (Cited in Delmas 2011: 97).

As recorded in a VOC charter of 1602, this requirement to maintain a daily log or written ‘memory’ of the voyage (a text that inevitably collected other, incidental details) was one of the most important instructions issued to navigators: pre-printed, lined notebooks were provided for the task, documents that would have a second life once lodged in the VOC

⁷ For some accounts of how post-apartheid South African literature engages the VOC archive, see Easton (2002); Samuelson (2007); and Carli Coetzee (2012).

headquarters as part of a vast Company archive devoted to the secrets of *Konst der Zeevaart* (Knowledge of Seafaring).

As Delmas writes, at the southern tip of Africa the 17th-century *daghregister*, ‘begun with the casting-off from Texel, would not...be stopped, and would continue its narrative for the next one hundred and fifty years of the VOC’s presence at the Cape of Good Hope’ (2011: 106). Once on land, the Company directives about logging daily events were equally insistent: ‘Of all that occurs in your neighbourhood, you will keep accurate notes and a diary,’ instructed Amsterdam on the eve of Van Riebeeck’s departure, ‘and shall not fail in this point’ (Moodie 1959: 8). In its very form, then, the document prefigures the shift from sea-going navigation to land-based natural history narrative that will transpire over the coming centuries at the Cape: the first entry of *The Journal of Jan van Riebeeck* as it now appears in published form is of course penned on board the *Drommedaris*, a vessel named, rather suggestively in this context, after north Africa’s ‘ship of the desert’, the camel⁸. ‘The wind still east, sometimes half a point to the south and now and then as much to the north, blowing freshly’, reads the entry for Christmas Day 1651, soon after setting sail, where the obsessive attention to climatic conditions is so clearly *underwriting* the massive ambition and but also uncertainty of 17th-century navigation:

Estimate to have sailed 26 miles from Texel on a south-westerly course and to be between the *Polder* and the *Gom*, where towards evening the whole fleet had to lie to the wind. All night we kept

⁸ In her account of colonial travel writing and transculturation, *Imperial Eyes*, Mary Louise Pratt describes the Cape as a particularly charged site for charting discursive and generic shifts in the writing up of colonial journeys. In discussing the work of Peter Kolb (1719), which comes after three centuries during which ‘European knowledge making apparatuses had been construing the planet above all in navigational terms’, she claims that it differs in a number of respects from later post-Linnaean natural histories: ‘Kolb was writing before narrative paradigms for interior travel and exploration emerged in the last decades of the century. In 1719 navigational paradigms still prevailed: the only part of his experience Kolb does present as narrative is his six-month sea voyage to arrive at the Cape’ (1992: 43).

between 20 and 23 fathoms in order to avoid the perils of the Flemish shoals (Van Riebeeck 1952: Vol. 1, 4).

‘A little postage stamp of native soil’: Marine Biography and the Bioregional

It is a sense of an ocean-based form spilling over onto land that I want to carry forward in considering the much more recent writers’ diaries at the Cape. Encoded within this long history of the diary as colonial form, it seems, is a fundamental tension between movement and emplacement, settlement and flux. If the kind of weather bulletins which one finds, almost as a reflex action, at the beginning of every entry in the day-registers of Van Riebeeck, Adam Tas and so many to follow want to claim a land-based settledness – the logging of a world from a still point at its centre – then they can just as easily be read as a legacy of positional uncertainty and guesswork on the open ocean.

Within the twentieth century, the diary form is again implicated within many of the nautical trajectories, displacements and passages into exile which are so constitutive of literary modernism. Sea journeys, and the possibility of embarkation and flight from the grey, overwritten European metropolis, play a major role in the imaginary of Camus’s self-writing, and it is a departure from Southampton to the Cape in the wake of the Sharpeville massacre that serves as a kind of overture to Fugard’s *Notebooks*:

The ship’s brass-band playing patriotic British music. Nostalgia and a flood of sentiment. Sheila in tears – myself too, but suppressed. Indulged this mood, savoured the bittersweet of our leaving. The last tug that had followed us to the harbour was turning away, our ship was slipping alone, into the ocean

The evening on deck. Biting cold. Wind and spray...Gone were the cobwebs of Europe and the past twelve months. I felt awakened – renewed – in life I again see the dimension, the big dimension. The ‘big conception’ of my youth. The spars were singing. God! How could I forget so much. Life is big, its possibilities infinite (1983: 11).

It is a passage in which the slow choreography of the once imperial port is displaced and quickened by the elemental. The writing registers the mixed anxiety and freedom that results in distancing itself from a European inheritance of play-making, of exchanging the London avant-garde for explicitly South African materials. The next entry made on the voyage is concerned with a very different kind of journey: 'Joburg to Orlando train. Tsotsis. Bicycle spoke – death' (1983: 11). Anyone who has watched the brutal opening scene of the 2005 film *Tsotsi* with Presley Chweneyagae playing the lead role will recognise that this is the germinal idea of Fugard's early novel of the same name. His *Notebooks* are a rich source for tracking these dense 'knots' of meaning and memory which provide a first intimation of the plays which we know will result; or to use a high modernist term that Fugard is drawn to, these 'images':

Ezra Pound: 'An image is the presentation of a psychological and emotional complex in an instant of time.' To which he adds a remark about the 'sense of liberation, of freedom' that follows. I use the word 'Image' a great deal. Pound's definition explains my meaning completely. I cannot add a word to it (1983: 77).

It is a reminder, as J. M. Coetzee wrote in a 1984 review of the *Notebooks*, of how intently Fugard strives to deploy a poetics of modernism across an oeuvre which might more often be classed as social realism, an impulse that gives his work much of its distinctiveness (1992: 372). It also helps to explain, I would suggest, how it is that the diaries record such a knotting together of private and public, of solitary reverie and social engagement, littoral and literal – and in ways where such terms need not be seen as mutually exclusive.

As the entries move back to Port Elizabeth and its environs, such 'images' become more explicitly personal and autobiographical, even as many of the passages are also in one sense a remarkable document of collaborative creativity: with the Serpent Players in New Brighton, and actors like Zakes Mokae, Norman Ntshinga, Winston Ntshona, John Kani and Yvonne Bryceland. Brief extracts from the journals were used in the introductions to his published plays, but in 1983 Fugard reflected that he never quite understood 'the chemistry of my relation with them' or of their

relation to the finished works:

They became a habit, serving many purposes – at one level a constant literary exercise which I hoped would lead to greater accuracy in expression. Without them my thinking would have been confused, blurred... Sometimes it was compulsive, at others I wrote nothing. They reflect a certain reality in terms of the South African experience but although I have lived through very major political crises, these are not reflected. And though I never consciously used the notebooks as a playwright, everything is reflected there – my plays come from life and from encounters with actual people. But I found that as soon as I got deeply involved with writing a play, I either forgot the notebooks completely or had no need of them (1983: 8).

What one reads then is a record of those periods between the major phases of playmaking and composition, when opaque but compelling images and as yet undisciplined creative urges are beginning to act, unconsciously or semi-consciously, on the writerly imagination, and in ways which meld the intensely private registers and mythic impulses of modernism with a textured, highly localised realism.

Reading back, Fugard remarks that the notebooks strongly confirm his sense of being a regional writer, one attuned to ‘the humble specifics of an Eastern Province world’ (cited in Gray 1986: 10). From a green perspective, perhaps one could even make the case for him as a *bioregional* writer, given the way that the *Notebooks* disclose a terrain shaped as much by river mouths, watersheds, and escarpments as by apartheid’s roads, factories and locations. He quotes with approval William Faulkner’s obsessive attention to a ‘little postage stamp of native soil’ in the American South (Gray 1986: 10)⁹. And as Rita Barnard remarks, the metaphor returns us to the dialogue of fixedness and flux, of local specificity and the international circuitry of literary modernism: it ‘not only suggests the small scope and value of the territory represented but also evokes the possibility of travel – the potentially global reach of the regional text’ (2006: 118).

⁹ Faulkner’s phrase comes from a 1956 *Paris Review* interview with Jean Stein Vanden Heuvel, collected in Meriwether and Millgate (1968: 255).

The compulsion to limn a literary space more regional than national is also central to the work of Stephen Watson, although his relation to the city of Cape Town that he did much to make ‘a place in the mind’ was if anything an even more vexed and ambivalent one. While an early poetry collection invokes Simone Weil’s dictum that ‘To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul’, in his 2005 ‘Afterword to a City,’ Watson turns to Philip Roth at his most savage in suggesting why a discouraged observer might remain ‘rooted to the spot’: ‘How could he leave? Everything he hated was here’ (2005: 211).

In one of the entries from *A Writer’s Diary*, he turns over in his mind the opening line of an early poem ‘Definitions of a City’, musing about there being a single sentence which might embody the interplay of nature and culture (words which he is prepared to use without quotation marks) in Cape Town and its environs, the peculiarly intense dialectic of given topography and human inroads in a place which he has explored throughout his career: ‘On the slopes above the city there are footpaths / cut through sandstone, following the contours...’ The poem’s epigraph is taken from Fernando Pessoa – ‘...because the town is Nature’ – while its long, over-spilling lines register the textures of the mountain-side and the ocean vistas it affords being meticulously distilled into words by a solitary walker.

‘The nature of any walk is perpetual revision,’ writes Iain Sinclair of his tramps around greater London, ‘Voice over voice’ (2002: 159). In each of Watson’s many poems which are, one senses, the writing-up of a walk across some portion of the Cape Peninsula, there is just this kind of line-by-line re-envisioning: a controlled, self-possessed poetic intelligence refines and reframes its verbal formulations, testing them against the effects of wind and light playing over ‘a city held there, almost en-islanded / by one rough mountain, by two cool porcelain seas’ (2000: 15). Again and again, within the scope of each poem, one can witness a careful, almost ritualistic procedure which works by slowly logging its environment from different angles, correcting and rewriting itself in thick stanzas as it seeks to bring the sandstone and the stone-pines into ever finer focus, to place the cold oceans and the particular light which hangs over them in their proper relation.

Yet at the same time, this is not a naïve form of writing nature. As a critic, Watson is acutely aware of how often this portion of the earth has been written (and overwritten) by navigators, natural historians and poetic

predecessors. In an essay on Sydney Clouts, he places this ‘Pen-insular’ poet of the 1950s and 60s (judged an interesting failure) in a trajectory which leads from Thomas Pringle via Roy Campbell to Guy Butler, quoting purple passages from each to show how ‘literary Romanticism in a 19th century British colony like South Africa was far more damagingly romantic than almost anything in the mother country herself’ (1990: 60). Numerous diary entries trace in a local context the vexed intersection of ‘landscape poetry’, literary theory and that strand of environmentalism which proclaimed, in the title of Bill McKibben’s landmark 1989 work, *The End of Nature*. Seeking to avoid the effusions of sub-Romantic poets, but also to evade the academic jargons of the 1980s, Watson gives at one point his personal, working definition of postmodernism:

[T]he moment in history when the word is no longer connected to the earth, when the word has left the world behind, when the immemorial marriage (and the myth of that marriage) between language and the organic is severed for good. (And now that severance celebrated as a higher form of wisdom, a liberation.) (1990: 33).

Setting itself against this, the early poetry searches for a language of descriptive exactness, of heightened precision and increased purchase on the natural world. Footpaths are a recurring motif, perhaps as a way of grounding a poetics which might otherwise tend towards ‘mysticism of a most misty sort’ which Watson himself discerns in the more unguarded moments of Clouts’ work (1990: 67). Often they appear in opening lines, points of access which concede from the outset that the landscape is an altered, created one, yet by the same token enable poems which are not so much descriptions of inanimate surroundings as self-aware meditations on the whole linguistic process of apprehending and then remaking one’s environment in words.

Yet for all his investment in poetry, perhaps what makes Watson singular in a South African context is his commitment to a certain kind of prose. His last published work, *The Music in the Ice*, reveals a long engagement with (and attempt to rehabilitate) the essay, in the older sense, as derived from Michel de Montaigne: an exploratory, personal, discursive

work (shorn of academic footnotes) which is linked to the French *essayer*, and to *assay*. The etymology carries with it the sense of *testing* or *trying out* an idea, in the manner of Samuel Johnson's 'loose sally of the mind', or Francis Bacon's 'dispersed meditations'. The result is an experiment in prose that is at once itinerant, often linked to the practice of walking, artfully disordered; but also highly controlled, stylised and distinguished by the rhetorical performance of a strong authorial voice.

Much of Watson's poetry, in fact, might be considered prose-like in this sense: long, carefully modulated sentences which rarely move beyond grammatical reach of the speaker, seldom relying on the compression of the modernist image. Appearing as a kind of refrain in *A Writer's Diary*, the poem 'Definitions of a City' opens out into a generous vision of continuity between the topography of the city and the tidemarks of its history, a literary ecology that is surely in large part generated by the porousness of the categories 'prose' and 'poetry' within his *oeuvre*:

And should you follow these footpaths really not that much further, they soon become streets granite kerbs, electric lights. These streets soon grow to highways, to dockyards, shipping-lanes. You'll see how it is – how these paths were only an older version of streets; that the latter, in turn, continue the highways, and the quays of the harbour, and even eventually, the whale-roads of the sea.

You'll see how it is – it is still that kind of city – here where one thing leads, shades into another ... (2000: 20).

Both Fugard's and Watson's diaries are of course carefully shaped literary texts; it would be naïve to consider a printed diary (particularly one published, in Fugard's case, by Faber and Faber) as more 'raw' or immediate than other literary modes. But nonetheless there are significant formal and tonal differences between them. Selected from over seventeen years of life-writing, the playwright's notebooks carry more of a sense of being workmanlike jottings, intended (as he tells us) to exclude 'self' as far as possible, and committed to incident, ideas, sentences overheard. By contrast, Watson's book records a year of daily entries, comprising a kind of self-conscious writerly experiment that reads more like a selection of short essays or *pensées*.

In the Preface, he makes a case for this minor literary mode which ‘can ingest almost anything; such is the privilege of the form’, ‘everything from the conditions of one’s stomach to that of the soul, from a flea to God’ (1997: n.p.). And if a certain strain of literary criticism contents itself with locating paradoxes and contradictions within a writer’s work (hunting for these ‘with the same zeal that old-time prospectors once went scratching for pay dirt’), for Watson this kind of contradiction is built into the genre itself. The diary gives its author ‘the freedom to be as contradictory as he or she might wish to be’, and reading back over his entries, he sees them as carrying the evidence of ‘an often day-to-day alternation between disquiet and composure, rebellion and acceptance, uncertainty and conviction, a hope dismayed and hope regained’:

Corrosive, even exhausting, such alternations might be, but they also form a part, if I’m not mistaken, of the deep systolic and diastolic movement which governs almost any life that cares to record its dialogue with itself (Watson 1997: n.p.).

This corrosive systole and diastole, moving constantly between dwelling and provisionality, or (to use terms that recur in his work) ‘rootedness’ and ‘thinness’, is at many points mediated through Camus’s writing. Like the ‘pine, dark mountain, star...’ which the speaker of one poem recites like a mantra in an attempt to recover the sense of growing up amid the forests and the numinous bulk of the mountain chain (2000: 3), the Cape Peninsula’s coves and beaches, as well as the mountain streams of the Cederberg – ‘tasting of rinsed stone, not water’ – join a cluster of ‘elements, archetypes’ which are compulsively revisited and recombined throughout his writing. It is a poetics which takes strength from Camus’s 1958 dictum that ‘a man’s work is nothing but this slow trek to rediscover, through the detours of art, those two or three great and simple images in whose presence his heart first opened’ (1970: 26).

Yet equally, what Watson is grateful to recognise in Camus is ‘a superbly conscious historian of one of the cultural consequences, or inner dimensions, of living in an effective colony’, a place ‘where beaches effortlessly outdid books, nature culture, and the local citizenry, happy in its philistinism, lived out lives devoid of culture and most other gods besides’:

Repeatedly, the Algerian colony is described in the terms Camus once used for the country's second major city, Oran: 'a town where there is nothing to attract the mind, where ugliness has played an overwhelming role, and where the past is reduced to nothing'... This was the unbearable lightness of being, colonial-style, of all 'lands without a past' and Camus was to give it one of its more far reaching articulations (2010: 148 - 149).

What one sees throughout Watson's criticism then is a recursive loop, or double-bind: in an attempt to staunch such absences and bring a more lasting literary identity to their immediate surroundings, his essays look elsewhere, reaching again and again for those authors regarded as having given imaginative substance to their native cities. Considering his various attempts to reveal Cape Town 'for what it is / a city of the southern hemisphere, more full of sky than streets' (2000: 17), it is striking how often Watson's poetics is buttressed by the cadences and images of writers from north of the equator, opening up a fraught dialogue between the rooted chronicler of place and the urbane, cosmopolitan critic intent on transcending the provincialism of South African literary liberalism in the 1980s.

At several moments, the essayist looks longingly at Czesław Miłosz and Zbigniew Herbert, writing in the very different political context of an Eastern Europe where poets were the ironic scourge of the 'comrades', rather than sidelined onlookers. The Algiers of Camus is joined by the Lisbon of Pessoa and C. P. Cavafy's Alexandria: all port cities, and all writers drawn to the imaginative and mythic possibilities of 'the sea close by'¹⁰. Yet even as he enlists them one becomes aware how differently positioned are these writers on the Mediterranean rim, able to draw on a lattice of classical mythology which allowed their different modernist projects to fashion 'a myth greater than the solitary and artificial flower of one poetic mind' (2000: 138).

¹⁰ This title of this unusual and self-mythologising 1953 exercise in autobiography by Camus, (framed as the 'Logbook' of an imagined voyage), lends the title to one of Watson's poems. The original ends with the famous lines: 'I have always felt that I was living on the high seas, threatened, at the heart of a royal happiness' (1970: 163).

The final part of this account seeks to trace how a postcolonial approach to such ‘day-registers’ – one which shows up the vexed relation between writing and belonging – might be crossed with a more broadly ecocritical inflection. Reading from the postcolony, how can one win the space to account for those passages which are haunted by ‘the teeming strangeness and menace of organic presences’, in the words of George Steiner: the ‘irreducible weight of otherness, of enclosedness, in the texture and phenomenality of the material world’ (1989: 139-40)?¹¹ For having set out his injunction never to be unfaithful neither to beauty nor the humiliated, Camus does after all push his thinking a step further: this imperative ‘still resembles a moral code and we live for something that goes farther than morality. *Si nous pouvions le nommer, quel silence...*’ (If we could only name it, what silence ...) (2000: 182; 1954: 160).

As Fugard and Watson are drawn to this Mediterranean littoral (a mirror image in some ways, a mirage in others) the local matter of ‘white writing’ – the psychological suppressions and socio-political silences of texts by those who feel themselves to be ‘no longer European, not yet African’ (Coetzee 1988: 11) – becomes implicated in the wider challenge of what might be called ‘writing white’: of rendering the non-human and the numinous in words, even while sensing that such raids on the inarticulate (or inanimate) might properly tend towards the simple litany, the mnemonic, the non-verbal, the blank page.

Relocated and reimagined by Coetzee at the height of apartheid, the phrase *l’écriture blanche* was originally one which Roland Barthes evolved via the prose of Camus’s early, coolly managed depictions of the north African coastline – ‘that style of absence which is almost an ideal absence of style’ (1984: 64)¹². It is dual genealogy which suggests again how ineluctably the (postcolonial) problematic of place becomes entangled in the broader (ecocritical) difficulties of apprehending the pleasures, pressures and aporias of the physical world.

¹¹ Watson draws on this passage in his essay, ‘Bitter Pastoral: The Meaning of the Cederberg’ (2005: 146 - 159).

¹² I also have in mind here the aphorism that ‘Happiness (or desire) writes white’.

Like Every Promise ...

... the beautiful in nature is feeble in that it is just a promise and strong in that it cannot be blotted out once it has been received. Words tend to bounce off nature as they try to deliver nature's language into the hands of another language foreign to it. But this is not to say that there cannot be sunny days in southern countries which seem to be waiting to be taken notice of ... (Adorno 1970:108).

When one reads in Watson's essay on Camus of a city 'where beaches effortlessly outdid books, nature culture' (2010: 148), the grammar produces an unusual yoking together of two of the most complex words in the English language. For a cultural materialist criticism, though, the idea that 'nature (effortlessly) *outdoes* culture' might be demystified and translated to mean that 'nature (tacitly) *encodes* culture' or 'nature *does the work of* culture'. And here 'culture' signifies not a touring opera company, a book launch or symphony orchestra programme, but (following Raymond Williams) something at once more ordinary and more powerful, more diffuse and more determined: something concerned with the relation between every human individual and the forms of expression available to them.

For much twentieth-century critical theory, the contradictions, elisions and overdeterminations of one's historical position cannot but play themselves out in whatever material substrate is to hand – fluctuating weather, littoral zones, tidal flows, the nearest available landscape – as the problems of social *locatedness* are dispersed and dispelled into physical *location*. To put this another way: in Fugard and Watson's accounts of outdoor dwelling, walking and thinking – all those passages which might go by the inadequate name of 'nature writing' – one undeniably senses something compensatory: how the very act of verbally reconstituting the textures of coastline or contour path on the page betrays an ineluctable apartness from the non-human world which the playwright and poet long to write themselves into: an apartness that might be serving as a proxy for other, more humanly engineered forms of social separation.

The copiousness and 'thickness' of Watson's writing about the Cape Peninsula is evident in a long entry of 2 March 1996:

Yesterday, for instance, I drove over the chain of Peninsula mountains to Scarborough, way down the Atlantic seaboard towards the southernmost tip of the Cape. On the pass over the Kalk Bay mountains I saw the coastal southeaster cloud pouring down the western slopes, the colour of those clouds close to the grey of mist. But there was also the astonishing salt-like whiteness of the sandstone scree on the slopes set against the grey of the fraying cloud, further highlighted by the clumps of pine, their trunks blackened by the pitch of noonday light.

I found myself more or less instinctively seeking out the textures, the tonalities in that landscape, devouring it so that I could remake it. I had the happiness of knowing once again that this peninsula, these landscapes, were a kind of infinity which would never be exhausted and which would continue to elicit from me this passion. As I drove, I was already experimenting with the words that might reproduce the combination of southeaster cloud, white mountain stone, gale force wind, and light blackened pines. I knew myself to be saturated by this world; it was akin to the experience of physical love, that sense of being drenched by the reality of another's being.

Later, there was the view of the sea at Scarborough, the Sicilian blue of the icy water; the coastal milkwoods glittering green and black under the volleys of wind and light (1997: 40 - 41).

Here then is an example of the 'littoral euphoric' that Watson discerns in Camus: a relocation of the pleasures of the ancient pastoral to the twentieth-century coastline (2010: 69). Yet at the same time the intoxication of representing the non-human and elemental on the page is combined with an awareness of the artifice and verbal experimentation that this involves.

And beyond this, there is surely something compensatory or compulsive about this kind of description; the exhaustive intimacy is in one sense an index of unfamiliarity, of being estranged from the majority of the city's inhabitants. The local familiarity it asserts is counterpointed by the international pull of his nomenclature (Scarborough, and why *Sicilian* blue?), just as the generous literary ecology of the poem 'Definitions of a City'

depends on the strangely out-of-place Anglo-Saxon compound: 'whale-roads'. Despite inviting a sense of continuity between built environment and the non-human world, both texts depend on a transport infrastructure from the 'old' South Africa, on sealed roads and driving. And if the Atlantic coastal route provides access, the raised freeways of the Foreshore, with unfinished outer viaducts suspended in the air, must surely be read as memorials to apartheid modernism: an ideology of division so ambitious it achieved an almost total segregation between city centre and ocean.

To stop here, though, is to remain within what is by now a predictable, even complacent, move of critical scepticism; it is also to assume that the texts in question are automatically more naïve than the critical approach used to brush them against the grain (something that Williams, with his own imaginative investment in a socially textured history of the English countryside, can hardly be accused of). But as Watson reminds us in his Preface, what distinguishes the writer's diary as a form (and these two examples are no exception), is their ability to stage such contradictory dynamics, and to reveal how they play out in time. To state the most obvious fact about the diary: it is a cumulative text, an incremental endeavour which does not proceed by propositions made and positions taken, but rather through a series of discrete entries which are correcting, rewriting and modifying all the others as they proceed.

It is a kind of writing that throws into relief the question of where the most intense and lasting meanings of a text are produced during the reading process: within the compass of a single sentence, or a single entry? Or in much larger, more diffuse agglomeration of textual parts where the writing / written self of the first page is so clearly not the same as that of the last paragraph? To this one could add that, for the casual reader, a diary is not a form that tempts a linear or chronological approach; rather, it is likely to be dipped into at random, so offering itself still further as a text which is reconfigured with each (re)reading. Finally, it is also a document of space between entries, a kind of (temporal) punctuation which might not be verbal but, like a musical rest, is nonetheless meaningful. The conclusions and connections that it tempts one to draw across these orchestrated silences remain implicit, suggestive and provisional.

This way of apprehending and living with a text over a long period of time is difficult to convey in an academic essay. But one can give some

sense of it in concentrating on the period of 1962-3 in Fugard's *Notebooks*, precisely the time in which he is engaged in an intensive reading of Camus's work. For Fugard the French-Algerian writer (in a recurrence of the metaphors of navigation and dead reckoning) 'sounds out and charts the very oceans of experience and thought, on which I find myself sailing at this moment' (1983: 94). In the first of many paradoxes to follow, we see Fugard posit Camus's world as a flight from the writing desk to the sensual degree zero of the coastline:

Camus's 'no life lived in the sun can be a failure' – I understand this now, having discovered the sun and the sea, and the long hot hours on the beach. Simply to go there involves me turning my back, literally and figuratively, on this room and table, this world where the words 'success' and 'failure' have meaning. Down there on the white sands, with the long wind blowing and the taste of the sea in my mouth, they are empty sounds.

A fine contempt is forged in the sun, tempered in the sea (1983: 104).

The move from the textual to the physical (as the critic zealously hunting for contradictions might point out) is one that is itself mediated through an intimate negotiation with a foreign text. And Camus's aphoristic turn of phrase might seem contentious and inappropriate when relocated to the racially segregated surrounds of Port Elizabeth in 1980s: New Brighton, Swartkops, the Korsten 'location'. Elsewhere in the same decade we see Fugard working up the ideas for *Boesman and Lena*, a play which takes as its 'image' not the solitary beach walker but an anonymous woman by the roadside wearing (in the memorable stage directions) 'one of those sad dresses that reduce the body to an angular gaunt cipher of poverty' (Fugard 1973: 1). What is Lena's litany of places if not the record of failed life in the sun? Or what does it mean for the white male playwright to suggest otherwise?

Yet it is precisely this mixture of confident arrogance and stringent self-abnegation required by the playwriting self that seems to find an analogue in the fluctuations of the littoral zone. After a passage meditating on the different 'character' of the beaches along the coast, an entry of early

1962 strikes that note of humility and insignificance in the presence of the non-human which is so common a trope in wilderness writing. At the same time though, one becomes aware (almost by the text's own admission) of how this supposed dissolution of the self could just as easily be described as its indefinite expansion: the 'limitless narcissism' that Freud evoked in his account of the 'oceanic' feeling, that quasi-mystical intimation of boundlessness and connectedness to the physical world (Fugard 1930: 72):

Now, thirty years old, feeling at times mortally sick from the corruption and duplicity of my country, I think that given time I could prepare, and find peace, by remembering, re-seeing, the little that I already have seen of life; and relive my dawning astonishment and wonder at the great beauty, complexity and honesty of that vast area of 'living experiences' that have nothing to do with man.

Has any previous age been so self-centred, so conscious of the human shape to the exclusion of all else?

The humility I felt this afternoon, crouched over a rock-pool, watching (1983: 48).

Such pious humility, after all, is not incompatible with the deep pleasure that Fugard records in spear fishing – 'that electric, orgiastic moment' of the kill – a bodily rush that he finds difficult to account for: 'All attempts to think and write about it, here at this desk, are uncertain, as if the essential experience, that part of me which hunts in the water, eludes memory' (1983: 108). The entries for these years, as Fugard swims, writes, reads and lives 'lightly' along the Eastern Cape seaboard, become a kind of 'nature writing' unusual for the degree to which these various kinds of uncertainty and elusion are bodied forth. A trust in the sensual intelligence and respect for the opaque psycho-sexual drives underwriting his play-making make the *Notebooks* remarkable for the range of relations to the non-human that they express, and the way that these are immediately, and creatively, folded back into the social activity of rehearsals with the Serpent Players in New Brighton (a company that stages, under exceptionally difficult conditions, warmly received productions of *Waiting for Godot*, *Mandragola* and *Woyzeck* during these years).

In the attempts to map the contours of an unknown and largely unknowable selfhood, the entries remain open to the land / sea borderline as it suffuses both the individual unconscious and the *longue durée* of human history along this coastline. On many pages we see cryptic images recorded from a 'rich and affirmative dream life' (1983: 222) populated by sea creatures. A trip to Klaasies River on the Tsitsikamma Coast entails a visit to *strandloper* caves, archaeological sites which, instead of calling forth untrammelled imagination (as is often the case in literary engagements with such nodes of 'deep time' in the southern African imaginary) actually *resist* being absorbed into a glib meaning or personal mythology: 'The caves provoked depression. I couldn't romanticise them – they stank of darkness and fear. They were too perilous – the human hold on those damp walls too frightened and insecure' (1983: 107).

Unlike many classic wilderness diaries from Thoreau to Edward Abbey, with their drive toward the hermetic and the pristine, Fugard's *Notebooks* rarely shirk the contact with manifold forms of otherness, cognitive dissonance and disturbance in their immediate context. It is, perhaps, precisely the fact that they are not operating under the self-imposed burden of being a form of 'nature writing' that makes them unusually open and unpredictable in their notations of the non-human: that their imaginative investment in it does not result in the kind of anti-social reflexes and ideological blindspots to which constructions of 'wilderness' inevitably fall prey. Abbey's *Desert Solitaire* (1968) is notorious for the way it effaces nuclear weapons testing and debates about fallout from the Utah landscape which it venerates; but at many points in Fugard's text, the menace of apartheid's security apparatus impinges on the Eastern Cape coastline all too directly:

Shell collecting at Cape Recife the other day. I knew what to expect because on the drive there I followed on the tail of a convoy of army lorries carrying Active Citizens' Force trainees and their guns to a nearby rifle range. The silence of the beach was persistently broken by the innocuous sound – and therefore so much more terrible – of rifles and automatic guns being fired on the range. Everything conspired to make the afternoon ominous. The sun went behind

cloud, a cold wind came off the sea, the tide rushed in with savage fury (1983: 81).

If some entries register a flight from the world of current affairs to a private space of rejuvenation, others record near daily contacts with destitute fishermen, beggars and the homeless. Encountering a small shark left to suffocate to death by an angler, ‘a heavy rock on its body just below the jaws’, the shockingly alien nature of this life-form calls forth a meditation on human atrocity:

When the angler packed up and left that particular rock, I took it over and found the shark. Far from being one of the harmless variety it had a mouthful of the most terrible-looking teeth – possibly ragged-tooth. Setting sun; rough white sea; strong South-Easter. The appalling intolerance and savagery of man when he encounters anything that does not fit into ‘his’ scheme of things... Out of the shark’s terrible jaws the voices of ...the condemned in death cells, the thin spiral of ‘time’ on Robben Island (1983: 209).

While revealing the naïvete that is central to Fugard’s poetics, it is also a passage which shows itself acutely aware of how the human will to power conflates various modes of otherness – social, racial, non-human. The prose here is able to register the psychic jolt of encountering the ‘teeming strangeness’ of another life-form without (as does so much nature writing in the colony) collapsing natural and cultural foreignness into each other; rather it tries to understand precisely this kind of de-humanization, in its widest sense.

Elsewhere in these years of the early 1960s, the crassness and violence of South Africa impinges still more directly: we are given Fugard’s shocked reaction to the shooting of Dennis Brutus, his attempts to deal with the racism ingrained in some of his extended family. But we also see charted his experience, by turns joyous and unsettling, of fatherhood. The idea of no life lived in the sun being wasted recurs as he watches his two-year-old daughter Lisa master her first ‘time concepts’: ‘Never such a radiance, such a passionate orgy of freedom as Lisa when she finds herself on the beach. Space and sea: the one inviting, the other provoking’ (1983: 97).

At the end of 1963 – following such complex rhythms of invitation and provocation which shape the larger project of self-writing – we see the reading, thinking and probing of the previous year knot itself into an ‘image’. A passage from Camus’s *Carnets* serves as the germinal idea for one of Fugard’s most inward and challenging works.

The story of Dimetos in Camus’s *Carnets*: falling in love with a beautiful but dead woman washed up by the sea, and having to watch the decay and corruption of what he loves. Camus: ‘This is the symbol of a condition we must try to define’ (1983: 107).

Dimetos would first be presented over 10 years later, opening at the Edinburgh Festival in 1975. Coming directly after the success and topicality of *The Island*, Fugard’s collaboration with Kani and Ntshona, this abstract and placeless work (Act One set ‘In a remote Province’, Act Two ‘Beside the Ocean’) found few sympathetic reviewers¹³. A revised version (with the locations specified as Nieu Bethesda and Gaukamma [sic] Beach in the Eastern Cape), found slightly more success; but nonetheless, the opening of the second act is one of many passages in which the heavily symbolic evocations of the sea margent read as flat and portentous when compared to the textured, daily world of the *Notebooks*:

DIMETOS: Sea. Sand. Sun. Sky. Elemental. There could be a beginning here, as easily as an end. The footprints leading across the wet sand to this moment, suggest a purpose.

The tide has pulled out so far I despair of its return...There are no landmarks. You walk until you’ve had enough (2000: 148).

What is intriguing, though, is that Fugard’s obsessive return to Camus and the Eastern Cape coastline yields both his most collaborative, workshopped and ‘political’ play, as well as his most solitary and cryptic. If

¹³ ‘Even from a (white) South African one cannot if you please, constantly expect apartheid plays’, one commentator wrote of the German-language premiere, ‘But does it *have* to be such a mytho-mishmash?’ (cited in Wertheim 2000: 101).

the austere classicism of *Dimetos* owes much to Camus, so too does *The Island*, with its stripped-bare, absurdist locale. The famous opening scene is based on Norman Ntshinga's descriptions of the Robben Island quarry, but is also so clearly underwritten by *The Myth of Sisyphus*. 'Each in turn fills a wheelbarrow and then with great effort pushes it to where the other man is digging, and empties it', read the initial stage directions, which in performance became a long, excruciating mime where the bodies of Kani and Ntshona limp and crumple under invisible blows: 'As a result, the piles of sand never diminish. Their labour is interminable' (47).

Like the many prison memoirs and 'jail diaries' that record the experience of being *Esiqithini* ('at the Island'), the play serves as a reminder that this 'low-lying lozenge of sand and rock' (Penn 1992: 5) is itself another important space for probing what the coastline might mean in the South African imaginary. In his autobiography, Nelson Mandela records being put to work dragging kelp from the ocean, looking back towards the city that seemed so deceptively close, 'winking in the sunshine, the glass towers of Cape Town' (2002: 201). The episode, in turn, lends its name to an anthology of prison writing from throughout the continent, *Gathering Seaweed*, edited by the Malawian poet Jack Mapanje.

Yet in an essay entitled 'The Meaning of an Island', amid the earnest 'nation-building' of the early 1990s, Watson strikes a characteristically discordant note. Writing of the Esiqithini-Robben Island Exhibition at the South African Museum in 1993, he remarks that 'it was the very gaps in this exhibition's documentation which suggested that Robben Island harbours a deeper, more difficult, and indeed haunting significance, than the political one so often claimed for it' (2010: 461). Turning to the colonial archive of the 18th and 19th centuries, he rejects the tendency to confer liberatory potential on the obscure fates of those sentenced by the VOC Council of Justice, or to label its victims as early 'freedom fighters'.

By the same token, only an illegitimate act of the imagination could attribute a triumphalist political meaning to the words of Katyi, the sick wife of the Xhosa chief Maqoma, both confined to the Island in the late 1850s, and who is reported to have refused medicine with the words: 'No, my heart is sore, I want to die' (2010: 463).

Contra to the ANC *mythos* that was in the process of being constructed around Robben Island, the essayist describes it instead as ‘a natural memorial to the nameless; and, not least, to a suffering no less extreme for having been overwhelmingly anonymous and now largely unremembered’ (2010: 464).

If this kind of ‘nature writing’ is apolitical, then this is only in the sense of being suspicious of any prevailing political consensus, in being wary of the replacement of one nationalist historiography with another. Similar misgivings – which could have been read as ungenerous, even reactionary at the time, but which now seem prescient – can be found throughout *A Writer’s Diary*. Various entries question the autocratic nature of the African National Congress, and the glibness of many applications for political amnesty. At one point the diarist despairs of the flattened language used by a perpetrator – ‘Unfortunately we kept hitting him until he died’ (1997: 155) – at another point, he states flatly of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission: ‘You can’t apologise for the unforgiveable’.

At the same time, we see how the shift from Cape Town as a seat of political struggle to a city now marketed as a world-class tourist destination (with abundant ‘natural capital’, as the tourist board refers to Table Mountain National Park) has only compounded the challenges which his work sets itself. Reflecting in 1996 on how his surroundings seem to have taken on ‘the patina, the glaze of a giant Club Med’, he remarks that ‘not far into the next century I suspect that Cape Town, a city remarkable for having a mountain in the middle of it, will have managed to relegate even its natural environment to a kind of sideshow’ (1997: 150). The ‘cultural degree zero’ of Camus’s colonial formation persists in the globalised, 21st-century metropolis; but now this sun-struck sensuality and ‘solar mysticism’ can hardly be separated from the more ordinary pagan rituals of mass tourism on Camps Bay and Clifton beaches. In Watson’s essay on Camus, he comes back to the simultaneous strength and fragility of a poetics that is *materialist* in all its complex senses: ‘What is, from one point of view, a quiet yet triumphant assertion of the body, its liberation, is also shot through with a kind of melancholy. For if the body is now king, it is because all other thrones or sites of worship have been vacated’ (2010: 69-70).

In the totality of the diary, though, such disaffected responses to the public world are not absolute, or unchanging. Based on daily rhythms and shifting internal weathers (rather than the single, abstracted moment of the

lyric, or the position-taking of the polemic) the diary form prevents that note of misanthropy and disgust which mars some of his writing from contaminating the whole. Rather, there is the sense of other voices entering the text, each demanding their own forms of dialogue: the nightly radio bulletins of the TRC, which continue to intrude; the drunk man looking for work who turns away saying ‘You people all just want to live alone’; and – in the record of a lone vigil in the Cederberg – the cadences of |Xam orature as recorded in the Bleek and Lloyd Collection, voices which come to underwrite, in the deepest sense, his evocations of the Cape fold mountains:

Besides, it is these evening skylines that provide me, repeatedly, with a visual, spatial representation of what I would like a line of poetry to be.

Yes, to write one verse which has both the clarity of line, the poise, as well as the weightiness, that density-in-clarity, of the western slope of the Sugarloaf when the sun has gone down behind it and the sky lifts as it begins to drain ... (1997: 85).

To give one final example of the kind of suggestiveness enabled by the diary: on 13 March 1996, Watson writes of the Yugoslav war crimes tribunal in The Hague, and quotes an article in *The New Yorker* where the writer ‘makes an ingenious connection between the horrors unearthed by this tribunal and the presence of the Vermeers in the Mauritshuis in the same city’, an artist who ‘must also have painted in an historical period of almost constant chaos and ferocity – certainly of social upheaval to equal anything in Bosnia’:

And he remarks that often in Vermeer’s work ‘the themes... are saturatingly present but only as felt absence It’s almost as if Vermeer can be seen, amid the horrors of his age, to have been asserting or inventing the very idea of peace ... he had been finding – and, yes, inventing – a zone filled with peace, a small room, an intimate vision... and then breathing it out’ (1997: 47).

In its play of presence and absence, its international reach, and its combination of deep historical perspective with the sanctity of private space, this offers itself almost as an organising ‘image’ of the diary as a whole. But

its larger resonance only accrues with the next entry, which now becomes more than a description of the weather:

Another cooler morning: after sunrise a sea-fog moves off the bay and drifts into the suburbs. All the doors and windows of my Woodstock house are open to release the heat still trapped inside from yesterday's high temperatures. The fog flows through the rooms, its pale whiteness like a principle of coldness in the air, as if it were the colour of the cold itself made visible in the air (1997: 47).

Here the writing itself seems unconsciously to be 'breathing out' and releasing its own idea of peace into the city, and the wider social body.

This still point is soon dissipated by the wind. But nonetheless we are left with a text which emerges as a compelling document of the South African transition, precisely because of its candour in logging cognitive dissonance and difficulty. It shows a rare ability to stage the fundamental writerly paradox that – to adapt a line from Watson's one-time colleague J. M. Coetzee – whatever can be articulated is falsely put, and whatever cannot be articulated must be lived through (2000: 70).

In the afterword to *A Littoral Zone*, Douglas Livingstone wrote of how this 'mysterious border that shifts restlessly between land and sea' had to him 'always reflected that blurred and uneasy divide between humanity's physical and psychic elements' (1991: 62). Through the examples of Fugard and Watson, we might begin to see how the changeability and marginality of the diary form itself interacts with (and enables a space to reflect *on*) other kinds of liminality: spatial and environmental, but also generic, socio-political and imaginative.

This is not, however, to imply that all writer's diaries are similarly valuable. Indeed, the particular qualities of Fugard's *Notebooks* from the 1960s and 70s are perhaps most clearly shown up by comparing them with some more recent entries from the early 1990s, a selection published in the special issue of the journal *Twentieth Century Literature* in 1993. By his own admission, they have become little more than 'a catalogue of daily trivia. I doubt whether an original thought or image has found its way onto their pages for years':

Paging through the published Notebooks yesterday, I realised with a shock how the quality of my intellectual life has deteriorated over the past ten years – unquestionably the result of the measure of success I now enjoy as a playwright and my inability to protect myself from the damaging consequences of the American Success Syndrome. The decline has been insidious (1993: 528).

Removed from the Eastern Cape locale which generated so many of his most important works, the entries apprehend ‘South Africa’ as mediated through newspaper stories and BBC documentaries, and record place as mere scenery, a template on which to impose already formed thoughts: ‘A perfect match: bright sunlight and flamboyant fall colours outside the train window, and Janet Baker’s passionate rendering of a Handel aria on my Walkman’ (1993: 529).

The flatness and all-too-easy consonance of this American diary can be compared to the friction, flux and resistance encoded in the earlier day-registers, where the capacity of a mind at full creative stretch to ingest eclectic sources is figured in the far more unexpected and provocative juxtapositions of ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ that fill the pages. To select almost at random from one of many specimen days: in an account of a typical evening at ‘S’kop’ (his rustic cottage at Schoenmakerskop, used for writing retreats), we read of a mingling of the visual, ecological and musical:

Last night’s fare: a chapter on Ukiyo-e prints; a few chapters on marine biology and, to end with, Mahler’s Fourth Symphony while I sipped lemon tea.

Little candles held up in enormous and dark rooms – madmen muttering and singing in the corners. I was deeply moved by the richness, the beauty, the pathos of the human adventure. Those solitary courtesans in kimonos, the primeval mystery of the single-celled protozoa, Mahler singing! (1983: 96).

It is one of many moments in which a fascination with the ‘carnal reality’ of play-making – the fact that it draws on the body in space, under duress, and in real time – translates into a very physical response to the different kinds of stimuli which the diarist exposes himself to. So too, the passage is surely

underscored by Camus's credo of full lucidity in the face of absurdity, suffering, and unmeaning: the great humanist motto of *The Plague* that 'there are more things to admire in men than to despise' (1991: 308). Inevitably though, the stillness and sense of achievement inscribed in this moment is soon dispelled in the ongoing flux of the diary form. The next entry records a joyless, blustery walk in the veld: 'The bluegums outside Pieter's house: whipped savagely by the wind and roaring back...Why does the wind desolate more than anything else in nature?' (1983: 95-6).

As in those passages where the rainless south-easter strafes Watson's Cape Town, worrying at the built environment and human structures of meaning more generally, the weather is hardly the signifier of daily ordinariness with which we began (an idea which, in any case, seems impossibly dated in a twenty-first century context of climate change and unreadable flux within the biosphere). Rather, both these projects of life-writing ask for a more creative account of the relation between natural, personal and social histories within southern African letters. Set back from those pressured public spaces which demand a loudly advertised 'self-consciousness' with regard to one's 'politics' and 'subject position', the diary form offers a space to think through each of these in ways that are creative rather than reductive, implicit rather than overt: to trace them, in other words, as *lived* rather than merely proclaimed.

Beyond this, they may gesture towards what is entailed in bringing littoral (and literary) spaces tainted by discourses of leisure, conservatism and privilege into a more communal post-apartheid imaginary. Without wanting to lean too heavily on a simplistic equivalence between word and world, one might even suggest that in each the result is a prose which has the sense of having been tempered and impinged on by outdoor conditions: a critical language shaped and thickened by the littoral to which it constantly returns, complicated by its tides and textures, made more subtle by its gradations.

The coastal wind carries on blowing throughout Fugard's *Notebooks*, right until in the last entry for 1974. Typically, it registers in these closing moments that co-existence of the numinous and the workaday inherent within the creative process, receptive toward whatever form of otherness may present itself during the physical act of writing:

The wind has turned. A moderate easterly all day, calm sunset and twilight and then, about half-an-hour ago, the westerly moved in. For me it remains a spine-tingling mystery how that wind brings with it a world so uniquely its own

In among all the wind rattlings and buffetings at the door, just occasionally a very clear and simple double knock. I answer: Come in. So far nothing (1983: 225).

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Narrativising the Past: The Quest for Belonging and Citizenship in Post-apartheid Indian South African Fiction

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Abstract

The post-apartheid moment and its ‘rainbow nation’ project have been remarkable for activating both anxieties over questions of belonging and citizenship, and ethnic self-assertion. A number of fictional works that are produced at this moment engage with imaginative reconstitutions of the past as a function of contemporary politics. In this article, I explore how three post-apartheid Indian South African novels construct oceanic voyages and the subsequent struggles of indentured labour, translating indentured and passenger Indian subjects into South Africa’s citizens. I argue that the histories that the three novels construct articulate the sacrifices and commitments that Indian South Africans made to legitimise their belonging and citizenship claims.

Keywords: Indian Ocean, citizenship, belonging, Imraan Coovadia, Aziz Hassim, Ronnie Govender

Introduction

This paper traces how the arrival of Indians in South Africa and subsequent struggles for citizenship and belonging in the 1860s-1980s are represented in Imraan Coovadia’s *The Wedding* (2001), Aziz Hassim’s *The Lotus People* (2002) and Ronnie Govender’s *Song of the Atman* (2006). These narratives emerge in the context of the desire for a definitive history that both reassures Indian South Africans of their legitimate space in the post-apartheid

formation and balances the tension between a common citizenship founded on a non-racial constitution with the need to articulate Indianness in South Africa. For many scholars¹, the post-apartheid moment and its 'rainbow nation' project simultaneously activates the past and offers an opportunity to articulate a specific Indian identity that in the apartheid era had, for political reasons, been rejected in favour of a 'black' identity claimed by all the oppressed peoples of South Africa². The recalling of Black Consciousness's politics of non-racialism in these narratives emerges in the post-apartheid moment as a critique of the realities of the new 'rainbow' nation.

Coovadia's debut novel, *The Wedding*, written during the author's sojourn in the United States, constructs the story of Ismet Nasin's and Khateja Haveri's voyage from Bombay to Durban. Narrated by the protagonists' grandson, the novel represents experiences that are prototypical of passenger Indians in Durban in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The materials from which the narrator (re-)constitutes Indians' beginnings in South Africa are gleaned from the narrator's forebears, and he claims it as a 'knowledge that belongs to [him]' and which he needs in order 'to find [his] bearings' (Coovadia 2001: 267). The resonance between the narrator's articulated desire for his 'bearings' and the voyage to, and migration from, South Africa implicates politics of location as critical to the construction of Indian South African selfhood. Narrativising these beginnings for the narrator becomes critical to navigating his cultural identity across different locales.

The Lotus People, also Hassim's debut novel, represents the experiences of passenger Indians in Durban. In the novel, Hassim, a third-generation Indian South African, represents what he claims in an interview

¹ See, for instance, Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie (2000: 27); Mariam Pirbhai (2009: 71); Pallavi Rastogi (2008: 114); and Goolam Vahed and Ashwin Desai (2010: 4).

² Anti-apartheid struggle deployed non-racialism as its guiding ideology to counter apartheid's separatism. During the struggle, affirmation of blackness was regarded as a marker of political identity rather than a racial one and an act of self-definition rather than being defined by others. It was also a conscious rejection of apartheid's deliberate strategy to undermine the unity of all the oppressed peoples of colour.

with Rastogi to be a historically accurate portrait of conditions of the passenger Indians in South Africa (2008: 221). Set in Durban's Casbah, the novel traces the lives of two passenger Indian families through four generations³. But it straddles a larger communal backdrop, as Devarakshnam Govinden notes (2008: 29), weaving the stories of both ordinary and affluent Indians into a common tapestry of belonging and citizenship. Written from the author's conviction that 'the truth that remains untold is the beginning of a lie,' the novel is devoted to showing 'where all the Indians are coming from' (Rastogi 2008: 221), a grand aim that the author indicated he hoped to realise in the sequel, *The Revenge of Kali* (2009) that constructs the harsh experiences of the indentured Indians⁴.

Govender's *Song of the Atman*, like the first two novels, also retrospectively constructs the history of Indian beginnings in South Africa, focusing on the experiences of indentured labourers. The novel, a fictionalised account of Chin Govender, the author's uncle, traces the protagonist's life across different locations in South Africa while anchoring its trajectories on the protagonist's humble beginning. Chin's father, Karupana Govender, as a young man, accompanied his parents to South Africa from Thanjaoor, India as an indentured labourer. Remarkable for his resilience, Karupana is undaunted by the toils and hazards of daily labour the cane fields as he sings his favourite Carnatic songs (Govender 2006: 28). Karupana initiates a culture of refusing to suffer indignity, a tradition that is handed down to his descendants and that in later years becomes for them an inspiration for outright forms of anti-apartheid resistance.

In the next three sections, I explore, first, how pastness is produced as a function of contemporary politics; second, how oceanic voyage and subsequent processes of transplantation translates subcontinental seafarers into South Africa's citizens; and third, how the anti-apartheid struggle emerges as an altar upon which Indian South Africans lives are sacrificed as

³ See n.4, p.2 for the distinction between 'indentured' and 'passenger' Indians.

⁴ The two novels, together, construct the 'truth' of Indian beginnings in South Africa, for Indians, as is already well known, arrived in South Africa in two distinct categories: either as indentured labourers or as voluntary, self-paying passengers, who mostly belonged to the business class.

a symbolic purchase on South Africanness. In each section, I treat the imaginative reconstruction of pastness as anchored on the political demands of narrating the post-apartheid moment.

Post-apartheid Politics and Representations of Pastness

Coovadia's, Hassim's and Govender's novels construct apartheid and pre-apartheid pasts in ways that invite re-examination of contemporary realities. The novels suggest that imaginative engagements with these pasts stem from the urgent demands and anxieties of narrating the post-apartheid present. The new dispensation, for Indian South Africans, usher in profound disillusionment and a victim consciousness that Goolam Vahed and Ashwin Desai have captured in the parallel they draw between the experiences of the Jews in anti-Semitic Europe and the 'stranger' stereotype borne by 'Indians' in South Africa (2010: 3). Vahed and Desai highlight how affirmative action has occasioned widespread disaffection among many 'Indians' towards 'Africans' for appropriating the 'Black' identity forged during the anti-apartheid struggle and excluded them from the promises of the post-apartheid nation⁵ (2010: 6 - 8).

⁵ Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie (2000: 28) captures a similar disillusionment in a common refrain of Indians, that 'for years apartheid discriminated against us as we were too black, now we are not black enough to gain from affirmative action'. These concerns, however, do not acknowledge the provisions of Employment Equity Act, No. 55 of 1998 of the Ministry of Justice, Republic of South Africa which sanctions affirmative action. Section 2 of this legislation states as its purpose the need 'to achieve equity in the workplace by (a) [p]romoting equal opportunity and fair treatment in employment through the elimination of unfair discrimination; and (b) [i]mplementing affirmative action measures to address the disadvantages in employment experienced by designated groups, in order to ensure their equitable representation in all occupational categories and levels in the workforce'. Section 1 defines 'designated groups' to mean 'black people, women and people with disabilities' and 'black people', in the spirit of Black Consciousness, as 'a generic term which means Africans, Coloureds and Indians'. Section 3 states that the Act must be interpreted, among other stated restrictions, 'so as to give effect to its purpose'.

The pasts that the three novels construct articulate these concerns to legitimise belonging and citizenship claims advanced by Indian South Africans. Post-apartheid politics and the desire to celebrate the new nation's multicultural constitution become central to the dismantling of the whites/non-whites vector that had been invoked to rationalise apartheid governmentality. The narratives play the crucial task of weaving experiences of Indians, as one of the peoples disenfranchised by apartheid, into the national narrative. In view of Brij Maharaj's observation of how ethnic identity is always determined by struggles, the formation of Indianness in South Africa is shaped not only by its engagements with Europeans as the dominant group and with other marginalised groups in their struggle for resources, entitlements and privileges but also internally in its struggle for control over its 'material and symbolic resources' (2006: 69; cf. Vahed 2002: 77).

Focusing on the oceanic voyage and subsequent transplantation that, as Meg Samuelson (2010: 273) has underscored, translates indentured and passenger Indian subjects into South Africa's citizens, I explore how anxieties and celebrations of cultural identities in the post-apartheid moment motivate the search for roots and imaginative engagements with history and the quest for recognition as South African citizens in the three novels. The 'narrative performance' that these novels stage, in Bhabha's expression, 'interpellates a growing circle of national subjects' and produces the nation as a narration (1994: 209) simultaneously through what Philip Holden has termed, after Bhabha, its 'retrospective' and 'anticipatory' pedagogies (2010: 455). The narratives thus furnish a critical means for articulating both Indianness and South Africanness. In light of Mariam Pirbhai's inquiry into South Asian diasporic formations, I aim to explore, not only how Indianness is constituted in South Africa through its place within the quadratic axis of race relationships (2009: 68), but also how the vexed questions of citizenship and belonging are complicated by race and class.

Belonging, as Vahed and Desai conceptualise it, implies being 'a part of or connected with something'; it 'assumes voluntary membership by those who constitute a self-generated group' (2010: 9). Belonging can further be construed after Gerard Delanti as a component of citizenship. For Delanti, citizenship, beyond its preoccupation with rights, involves participation in the affairs of the political community:

It concerns the learning of the capacity for action and for responsibility but essentially, it is about learning of the self and of the relationship of the self and other. It is a learning process in that it is articulated in perception of the self as an active agency and a social actor shaped by relations with others.... Citizenship concerns identity and action; it entails both personal and cognitive dimensions that extend beyond the personal to the wider cultural level of society (2002: 64 - 65).

The performative sense of citizenship that Delanti captures here underlies Coovadia's, Hassim's and Govender's choice to focus not so much on the granting of formal citizenship to the subcontinental subjects, albeit in a limited sense, in 1961, a century after the first group of their forebears arrived in South Africa, as they embraced the struggle and sacrifice for a just South Africa. In these novels, belonging is contested and re-inscribed in ways that complicate questions of national and diasporic identities. For Indian South Africans – as a group that from the dawn of their arrival in South Africa have had to contend, first, with the oppression, deprivation and segregation under indenture, colonialism and apartheid and, later, with uncertainties of the post-apartheid moment – belonging can be constituted imaginatively by re-constituting the past as a site where desire and hope converge.

For Pallavi Rastogi, the return to the pasts in Afrindian fiction, as she terms it, is prompted by the need to stake a claim on the present. Rastogi contends that this gesture was part of a wider trend in South African fiction, echoing the call by writers such as Njabulo Ndebele to move away from the 'spectacle' to 'rediscovering the ordinary' (2008: 114). In the three novels, memory lends itself readily to the critical task of not only re-constituting the past from the present and but also mining quotidian experiences and strategically asserting continuities between the two temporal planes to legitimise national belonging and citizenship claims in the post-apartheid moment. Recognising this tendency towards the ordinary, Samuelson postulates:

To the extent that we can talk about a South African literature ... it is one marked, even fractured, by the search for a form through which

to articulate the extraordinariness of everyday life in this place, to harness the resources of the ordinary, while simultaneously pushing beyond its cruelties, reaching for the horizon (Unpublished conference paper).

Celebratory in her approach, Samuelson acknowledges the ‘tyranny of place’ that Eskia Mphahlele identifies as the condition of South African literature under apartheid, emphasising the need to turn to the ‘here and now as a location from which to open up into connections to other places, or to imagine other ways of inhabiting this place.’

Samuelson’s insistence on a specific spatial present, in intriguing ways, resonates with Rastogi’s reading of the return to the past in post-apartheid fiction. Both are, however, different strategies of a nationalist pedagogy that, in the former case, is retrospective and, in the latter, anticipatory; and both reveal quotidian textures of experience which, as Rastogi notes after Ndebele, had been ‘forgotten in the grand narrative of political struggle.’ The surfacing of such forgotten or, indeed, ‘erased’ experiences and histories becomes for Indian South Africans an avenue through which to carve for themselves a space in the democratic present. As Rastogi aptly notes, the ‘return’ to the pre-apartheid – and, for this chapter, apartheid – past(s) in Indian South African fiction produces a form of literary ‘retrieval’ that ‘uncovers the story of Indian *arrival* in South Africa ... in order to assert national belonging in the present’ (2008: 115).

As a departure from this mode of reading which posits the pasts as frozen segments of time to be *returned* to or *retrieved*, I treat pastness here as a site of contestations or, as Immanuel Wallerstein contends, a tool that people use against one another – *and* in a bid for legitimation. Pastness, in this sense, signifies ‘a mode by which persons are persuaded to act in the present in ways they might not otherwise act’; it is paradoxically diachronic and often dictated by present needs. Wallerstein notes further that in so far as it is used as a mode of social control, ‘pastness is always a contemporary phenomenon’ (1987: 381). Such notions of pastness suggest a critical tool that, while attending to its modes of imaginative construction, takes into account its textual or transitory nature.

As works of historical fiction, Coovadia’s, Hassim’s and Govender’s novels rally tropes of memory and genealogies to constitute narratives of

national belonging by traversing vast locales and temporalities in the interest of producing Indianness in South African. In Michael Green's sense, the 'historical' in this context evokes not the traditional notions of 'change over time' but rather 'the particularly intransigent set of circumstances signified by the word apartheid.' It signifies not so much a series of temporalities as 'an extreme awareness of the present as history' (1999: 3-4; 16-17) and, indeed, history as the present. The hermeneutic strategy that this notion of the historical as bound temporalities calls for implicates the interplay of history, narrative and ideology and re-echoes what Green terms 'resistant form,' by which he means

the search for a critical model as much as an aesthetic mode that can, at one and the same time, recognise the inevitable constructedness of its subject within its own productive processes, yet create that subject in such a way that that subject challenges the terms within which it is constructed – thus resisting the very form within which it is produced (1999: 6).

The notion of resistant form expressed here resonates with the ways in which narrativisation of the past emerges as subjectification processes in the three novels. The historical revisionism that these novels stage from the post-apartheid present is not so much about the narrated contents as with the production of the historical. Thus, the novelistic form, as Green maintains (16), becomes critical to the construction of collective identity– an Indian South African one in this case – requiring a keen awareness of its politics.

Sea and Soil in Pre-apartheid Pasts

Indian migrants, as indentured labourers or as free passengers, come to South Africa in the late nineteenth – and early twentieth – century under the auspices of British colonialism. Their voyages across the Indian Ocean establish contacts between Africa and the Indian subcontinent, resulting in the consolidation of diasporic presence in South Africa, complicating the country's racial politics even further (Rastogi 2008: 4; Maharaj 2009: 73). The conditions and dreams that attend their migration to South Africa are compounded by the realities of British colonialism within which they are

enmeshed. Coovadia's, Hassim's, and Govender's novels plot the processes of claiming citizenship and belonging that follow their settlement which, as Isabel Hofmeyr and Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie suggest elsewhere, reflects developments in the ways 'India' perceived itself – and is perceived – within the empire (2007: 7). This perception is, in turn, reflected in the ways Indian South Africans positioned themselves in anti-apartheid struggle, and remains relevant in making sense of how the group relates to their host/home country. The shift from an India within the empire (which thus shares its boundaries, particularly that of 'the native'/'African'), to one positioning itself outside the empire and in opposition to it has significant bearings on the ways Indianness is constituted in South Africa and how Indian South Africans claim belonging in the post-apartheid present (Hofmeyr & Dhupelia-Mesthrie 2007: 7)⁶.

In intriguing ways, the sea and British colonialism provide useful frameworks for appreciating the migration of Indians to colonial Natal. In *The Wedding*, these two forces are central to the tensions that propel the narrative. The story that Coovadia plots in this hilarious novel begins with the pre-migration ill-starred marriage between Ismet and Khateja. In her determination to regain her freedom, having been forced into marrying a quixotic Ismet, Khateja schemes to make her husband's life 'a long gigantic horror' (2001: 74, 82). Ismet, on his part, obsessed with the idea of domesticating Khateja and turning her into a loving wife, decides to haul her across the Indian Ocean to Durban with a double vision of 'forging a commercial empire' and founding 'a new race' (2001: 105,119). Seemingly unaware of the ambit of British colonialism within which he is enmeshed, Ismet sets sail for Natal – which, like India, is also a British colony – bubbling with his own imperial fantasies.

The Africa he envisages is 'a clean table of a continent,' a place without a history, yearning for settlement. Ismet, in his assumed role as the father of a new race, fantasises: 'From Khateja's womb would spill a legion

⁶ Hofmeyr and Dhupelia-Mesthrie point out that this shift in Indian nationalist thinking takes place in the first two decades of the twentieth century. In the first instance, India saw itself as a self-governing colony within the empire but soon realises that it can attain freedom only outside the empire (6).

of children.... A hundred, a thousand, peopling the vast land' (Coovadia 2001: 119 - 120). Ismet's vision, as Samuelson eloquently argues, is 'allegorical of the emergence of a new Indo-African people' and 'suggestive also of the ways in which 'India' emerges as a product of what the novel describes as the 'aboriginal forge' of Africa' (2010: 270; cf. Coovadia 120). In Ismet's settler vision, the author satirises the colonialist orientation of the Indian business class 'of which Ismet is a classic example' (2001: 264) and mocks it for sustaining the group's illusions and attitudes about Africa, suggesting that such an orientation actually threatens any belonging and citizenship claim that they may advance.

The imperialist orientation that produces Ismet's fantasies is indicative of the perspective from which he operates. As the ship approaches the shores of Durban, Ismet, in his momentary euphoria at the prospects of carving for himself a fortune out of Africa, romanticises the continent as he disparages India.

[U]nlike India, Africa had been spared the nonstop penny-pinching of the spirit.... The important thing: there was a final break with this conniving, rhetorical, feverish India, this India of gambit and deception, this India in which it was beyond the capacities of any man to build up something new and strong, this tropical India in which it had become impossible to love! (Coovadia 2001: 119 - 120).

Sooner than later, however, Ismet realises that Africa – actually, colonial Natal – was not any different from colonial India. With its myriad of draconian laws around which Indian traders have to skirt painstakingly, Natal was possibly even worse. Dhupelia-Mesthrie points out that as early as 1896 there were fears in Natal that Indians would overrun the colony (2000: 16). The resultant climate of fear ushered in an avalanche of restrictive legislation in the first two decades of the twentieth century which culminated into the institutionalisation of apartheid in 1948.

The Wedding shows how oceanic voyage and the subsequent transplantation of Indian migrants come to constitute what Stuart Hall has described as a process of *becoming* (1990: 294). Amidst determined repression and growing disenchantment with Africa, Ismet's and Khateja's initial perception of themselves as mere sojourners is paradoxically

transformed into the reality of rootedness. For the couple, 'India' becomes simply a source of cultural sustenance and pride of 'being linked to an ancient culture,' as Vahed and Desai (2010: 5) have put it. The civilisation discourse invoked here implicates how racialised boundaries such as 'the native'/'African' (Hofmeyr & Dhupelia-Mesthrie 2007: 7), for the couple, unsettles the realities of rootedness in the continent. Despite their attachment to 'India,' the couple comes to a sudden realisation:

It was time, to start shooting off roots, to set seeds in the patient earth, time to husband their pool of resources. Had they travelled so far to embrace stagnation? India is a portable country, to some extent, which moves as people do, accommodating itself freely to new environments, but if they started off forsaking her, forgetting her in this and that detail, what would happen at the end of time? (Coovadia 2001: 157).

The ambivalence of adopting South Africa while conserving Indianness becomes, for the diasporics, a delicate matter in the process of identification. The need for 'shooting off roots' that the couple experience suggests a commitment to, and dependence on, the South African soil which negates their perception of themselves as mere sojourners – 'tourists on an extended pilgrimage' – who 'should keep to themselves, pacifically, and then... return home' (Coovadia 2001: 189).

For Ismet and Khateja, Durban becomes the closest approximation of their homeland as they grudgingly come to terms with the reality of their rootedness while still harbouring a vision of Indianness that is untainted by its contact with Africa. With its population of a million residents, equally distributed among blacks, whites and Indians, Durban, as the narrator remarks, 'housed the largest number of Indians in a single place outside India [and] it was, excluding the subcontinent, the most rhetorical city in the world ... and ... in a sense ... created the nation-state of India' (Coovadia 2001: 142 - 143). *The Wedding* credits Durban, in Rastogi's words, for 'willing the Indian nation into existence'. Rastogi notes that it is in Durban that the diasporics first constituted themselves into Indianness (2008: 134). The harsh conditions under colonialism and later apartheid enabled the 'Indians' in Durban to suppress their internal differences in the interest of forging a pan-

Indian identity. Gandhi returned to the subcontinent with this notion of Indianness learnt in South Africa which culminated in the creation of Indian nationality in 1947.

In *The Wedding*, South Africanness is never really foregrounded. Towards the end of the novel, the atrophying of Indianness and Ismet's and Khateja's sojourners' dream leave only a hint that the protagonists have eventually rooted themselves in South Africanness. To the narrator, a third-generation South African Indian, India has become quite remote and has to be disavowed on careful consideration. In the United States, he does not have a clear answer for a Sikh driver who wants to know whether he is from India. Uncertainly, he struggles to pinpoint his Indian roots (Coovadia 2001: 274). His double heritage makes the articulation of his national identity a complex process.

In *The Lotus People*, Indian migrants leave the subcontinent for colonial Natal in the late nineteenth century in pursuit of new opportunities. The novel implicates British colonialism for engineering the voyages that bring the group to Natal. In sending his son to Natal, Yahya's father invokes the British colonial policy of using Indians to open up remote colonies for colonial exploitation (Hassim 2002: 50). The subcontinental seafarers arrive to a hostile reception as their economic adventurism comes into competition with that of European colonialists who view it as their prerogative to exploit Africa. The rich economic prospects that Africa presents set the two groups on a collision course. Commenting on the bitterness and sentiments against Indians, Maharaj notes that the whites in Natal were more concerned about what they described as the 'Asiatic menace' than the 'Native problem.' He maintains that such anti-Indian sentiments were engendered by the economic competition that Indians presented and the anxiety to contain their rapidly growing population, both of which were perceived as threats to white privileges (2009: 73). This brown-white tension, playing out within the context of British colonialism, not only raises the question of India's place within the Empire, as Hofmeyr and Dhupelia-Mesthrie maintains (2007: 7), but also the delicate divide between privileges and legitimacy, suggesting that belonging and citizenship claims ought to be wagered on the nature of a people's relationship to the soil.

The novel represents how the quest for belonging and citizenship supplants the sojourners' tendency of the first-generation Indian migrants.

The translation processes implicated here resonates with Delanti's observation that citizenship, in its cultural dimension, concerns identity and action (2002: 65). These processes, for the subcontinentals, involve dismembering attachments to the subcontinent in preference for the assertion of a South Africanness. The re-membling processes that follow involve reckoning with the realities of colonialism and apartheid and are vital to the making of Indianness in South Africa.

The logic of belonging and citizenship espoused in the novel requires the heirs of the first-generation migrants to perform their South Africanness as a gesture of home-making. Hassim sets the urgency of this citizenship duty against the temptation to emigrate from the country as Dara contemplates doing in a moment of what the novel describes as the 'fear generated by political impotence' (2002: 41). It is, however, not as though the Dara has not done anything for the country; in fact, he catalogues a list of his evident commitments to South Africa, emphasising the hard work and contributions of his family in building the country's economy and infrastructures (Hassim 2002: 24). Dara's concerns highlight the victim consciousness that steadily entrenches itself among Indians in contrast to the complicity that characterise Coovadia's world.

The novel suggests that economic investments and acts of charity do not in themselves endear one to a country that is torn asunder by injustice and misery. Likewise, it represents bitterness and impotence as antithetical to the quest for belonging and citizenship. Dara realises the futility of the sojourning dream that sustained his father's pioneering generation and paints a bleak future that awaits Indians in South Africa. His recourse is to prepare to vacate the country lest the business empire that his family has built comes to nothing. Jake, Dara's eldest militant son, however, dismisses his father's fears. 'We belong here', he says, 'we are part of the struggle ... this is our country. We can't just forsake the country' (Hassim 2002: 26). Jake's generation and the one after them have, in Dara's views, acclimatised themselves to the country and have 'comfortably accepted the African way of life' (Hassim 2002: 25). Where economic investment, largely viewed as another form of exploitation, seems ineffective as a rooting strategy, the younger generation resort to 'blood sacrifice' in the form of armed struggle as a more radical mode of asserting belonging and citizenship claims.

Govender's *Song of the Atman* makes one significant departure from *The Wedding* and *The Lotus People* in its representation of indentured Indians in South Africa. In this novel, belonging and citizenship rights are wagered on the 'sweat sacrifice' made by the protagonist's indentured forebears. Upon completing his indenture contract, Karupana Govender, as a marker of his valorisation of freedom and dignity, rejects an improved offer from his employer that would re-indenture him as well as the colonial repatriation scheme. Instead, he secures a job as a court interpreter (Govender 2006: 30). By choosing to settle in South Africa, Karupana redefines his relationship with the South African soil from that of a bonded labourer *tilling* it to that of a free migrant *owning* a piece of it. This choice prompts a particular mode of transplantation that Govinden has described as the setting up of 'little Indias' in South Africa. The process defines, among other things, the construction of temples or mosques, observing religious festivals, observance of 'Indian' customs, values, cuisine, architecture, forms of dressing, etc. As Govinden notes, such practices were not about replicating the subcontinent but rather 'reworking and recreating it in a new context' (2008: 83). The transplantation processes that Karupana activates spring from and signal the new relationship to the soil. The accommodation of Indianness in South Africa becomes a legitimate ground for advancing belonging and citizenship claims.

While transplantation emerges in the novel as one of the strategies for navigating the new life in South Africa, one of its unintended ramifications is the general waning of Indianness – which privileges South Africanness. The Govenders' command of Tamil deteriorates as they increasingly adopt English owing to the opportunities it presents, especially in terms of integration into the South African and global economies. In the novel, South Africa also mediates conversion of Indians to Christianity and, as in *The Lotus People*, the Anglicisation of Indian names. The resilience of characters such as Amurtham, Chin's mother (remarkable for her devotion to her religious faith), or even Veerasamy Govender (the author's paternal grandfather, reputed for his mystical powers), nonetheless, forms a bastion of resistance against the hegemonic forces of cultural imperialism.

Song of the Atman foregrounds the tense race relations in South Africa. The novel opens with a prologue that depicts Chin's visit to Robben Island. He has with him a letter that has 'the potential to disrupt the course of

his life – which up to now had been so ordered, so jealously private. This danger lay in its being made public’ (Govender 2006: 14). As a product of a community that so jealously polices its members’ conduct, Chin is ashamed of his paternity of Devs, an illegitimate son produced out of his liaison with Grace, an indigenous woman. The unease with which Chin negotiates his cross-racial liaisons and their aftermaths highlights the incapacity of transgression to obliterate the rigid racial boundaries between Indians and the black ‘Other.’ Chin’s attitude towards Grace and Greta, his white lover and benefactor, betrays his consciousness of racial hierarchy and, by extension, the racial superiority of his own Indian race over her black race.

As a novel that constructs indentured Indian lives in South Africa, *Song of the Atman*, of the three novels, represents not only the broadest spectrum of Indian characters, especially in terms of class, but also stages the most meaningful patterns of inter-racial engagements among the four South Africa’s racial groups. The novel grants prominent spaces to characters from the four races and, in forging inter-racial transaction, deconstructs apartheid racial taxonomies. These broad representations are possible because the experience of indenture positioned Indian South Africans within contact zones where meaningful engagements with other groups become both necessary and inevitable. The inscription of Indianness in such interstitial spaces, as P. Pratap Kumar maintains, is significant for generating awareness about a cultural group’s presence among the outsiders, which is crucial for social acceptance and quests for legitimation (2009: 54).

The novel, however, does not posit any essential Indian subject. Rather, Govender foregrounds the contradictions that class, caste, ethnic and racial differences raise among Indian South Africans. For instance, when Baijnath (also of indentured Indian parentage), who had earlier toyed with the idea of employing a gifted young man who could marry one of his daughters and become a partner in his business, discovers that Chin, whom he is set to employ, is a Tamil and (more importantly) belongs to a different caste, he discards the whole idea. ‘No matter how good Chin was,’ Baijnath resolves, ‘he could never marry one of his daughters. The prospective bridegroom had to belong to the same caste’ (Govender 2006: 24). In another instance, a combination of caste and class differences prevents Chin from marrying Rani, Gopal Puckree’s daughter, while Chin’s elevated class later in the novel enables him to marry Gopal’s younger daughter, Mogie. These

contradictions reveal the split within Indianness itself and points to how the segregationist tendency among Indians parallels apartheid's racial project.

Blood Sacrifice and the Anti-apartheid Past

The heterogeneity of Indianness in South Africa has been well documented. In this section, I want to draw attention to how the desire to showcase Indians' contribution to making of the new South African 'nation' produces a more inclusive narrative that destabilises entrenched stereotypes of Indians. As Vahed and Desai note, for instance, the 'stranger' stereotype that was directed not only at the business class but at Indians en masse (2010: 3), may explain tendencies in post-apartheid narratives to underscore the contribution of both lower-class and affluent Indians to the making of the new South Africa. While these narratives are careful to surface the diversity within Indianness, highlighting cases of collusion with the apartheid system, they simultaneously draw attention to exceptional commitments and contributions that are often obscured when anti-Indian sentiments are foregrounded.

In Coovadia's novel, as is the case with Hassim's and Govender's, the struggle for a just South Africa remains the most significant way of inscribing belonging. Although the reach of the novel stops short of the country's apartheid phase, the politics of Durban present Ismet with a choice similar to what the business class in *The Lotus People* and *Song of the Atman* face in terms of whether to confine oneself exclusively to business, or take the path of the struggle. Faced with the restrictive climate of Durban, Ismet, as typical of the business class in all the three novels, takes the former path. Getting embroiled in the politics of Durban, to him, amounts to 'playing with dynamite.' Vikram, Ismet's landlord and business partner, after trying in vain to politicise him, complains about 'this shortsightedness in the hearts of Indians who will only have themselves to blame if the road to freedom in this country is built over their heads' (Coovadia 2001: 223). The segregationist climate of Durban and the concomitant agitations anticipate the more concerted forms of anti-apartheid struggle that emerges in *The Lotus People* and *Song of the Atman*.

In *The Lotus People*, anti-apartheid struggle is reproduced as a critical avenue for inscribing rootedness and claiming belonging and citizenship rights. Samuelson has argued that in the symbolic and structural

movement of the novel, the transformative force of the ocean is displaced by the soil as a marker of national belonging. Samuelson contends, after Vijay Mishra, that the soil thus becomes a receptor for the ‘blood sacrifice’ that is ‘a necessary component of the right to claim the [country] as one’s own’ (2010: 275). Jake’s death in the hands of apartheid’s dreaded Security Bureau is significant for its symbolic purchase on South Africanness. This is especially so as it represents a refusal to conform to dictates of Indianness. Jake’s death also highlights one of the ironies of the novel, namely, that while Indianness is represented as antithetical to violence as a viable means of struggle, the unmasking of Jake as the famed *Aza Kwela*, the daredevil of *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (the African National Congress’s armed wing) instantly transforms him into a hero among his fellow Indians. Jake becomes an inspiration to many young Indian South Africans. His son, Zain, like many of his generation, promises to continue from where Jake has stopped. The pride that Indians draw from the realisation that *Aza Kwela* is one of their own highlights how the author values the Indian contribution towards the making of a just South Africa.

In the novel, the narrative oscillation between the past and the present contrasts not only two different modes of orientation to the subcontinent and South Africa but also two different approaches to the anti-apartheid struggle and the inscription of belonging and citizenship. In the struggle, the first-generation diasporics valorise non-violence and the power of reason over the militancy preferred by the younger generation. Their appeal to the civilisation discourse doubles as a signifier of their closer attachment to the subcontinent as the sacrificial approach preferred by their younger counterparts signify the latter’s closer affiliation to South Africa. Govinden, drawing on Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, has described the Satyagraha as ‘symptomatic of the question of discipline, order and control’ and that it was considered to be ‘*essentially* Indian’ during anti-apartheid struggle (2008: 56; e.a.), although, of course, both the ANC and the Pan Africanist Congress employed similar strategies in their civil disobedience campaigns until the 1960 Sharpeville Armed Struggle.

The linking of Indianness and the Satyagraha in this civilisation discourse privileges ‘India’ over South Africa. In a highly rhetorical delivery, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi makes an implicit claim that recourse to violence is tantamount to the destruction of Indianness, thereby equating

non-violence with Indianness⁷ (Hassim 2002: 67). As such, the rejection of non-violence by the third and fourth generations amounts to a rejection of Indianness and simultaneously, if only symbolically, entails embracing South Africanness.

In the novel, Indianness functions as a rallying point, mainly in the earlier non-violent phase of the struggle. The novel identifies key historical figures such as Naicker, Goonum, Dadoo, Zainub Asvat, and Fatima Meer, who, in solidarity with Blacks and Coloureds, play a pivotal role in forging a united front against apartheid. In particular, women feature quite prominently in the struggle, mobilising their men across class, religious and ethnic differences to present a concerted opposition to a series of repressive laws (Hassim 2002: 95 - 96). The generation that takes over from these activists, however, make a significant strategic shift, sacrificially resorting to the armed struggle as the most effective way stamp their claim on South Africanness. The recourse to violence emerges as a counterpoint to the Satyagraha mode that apartheid South Africa has rendered into an unworkable signifier.

The novel's logic suggests that South Africanness can only be purchased through unreserved participation in the struggle for justice. The path of the struggle, far from negating or stifling Indianness, is actually an endorsement of its truest codes. The novel ends with vignettes of personal, soul-searching odysseys as the four male protagonists – Sandy, Nithin, Sam and Karan – unburden themselves to their wives in a bid to resolve their inner conflicts and come to grip with the social imperatives that bind them to

⁷ One intriguing contradiction that emerges in Hassim's novel is that while defensive violence is represented as definitive of Dara's Pathan ancestry, Dara's locatedness in South Africa has come to redefine it as a total negation of Indianness. With the first-generation immigrants, Yahya Ali Suleiman, Pravin Naran and Madhoo Daya, there is so much emphasises on the conflation of non-violence and Indianness in their instruction to their descendants that it comes to function as a measure of one's worth. Jake, Dara's firstborn militant son, loses his inheritance to his younger brother, Sam, due to his recourse to violence in the anti-apartheid struggle. Jake's choice of lifestyle, informed by a greater loyalty to his country, alienates him from his family.

the cause of justice – seemingly the only path to South Africanness. While the generation of their children have irrevocably committed themselves to resisting apartheid and embraced the country as their own, the four men, in the face of what seems to be the only logical recourse suggested in the novel, continue to vacillate on the vexed question of what form their participation in the struggle should take.

As in *The Lotus People*, the younger generation in the novel injects some militancy into the struggle. The establishment of *Umkhonto we Sizwe* signals the recourse to armed struggle. Govender, as Hassim does, also plots the processes through which Satyagraha is supplanted by armed struggle in the anti-apartheid movement, highlighting how the generational divide becomes critical to this shift. Besides, there are striking similarities between Hassim's Jake and Govender's Guru, Chin's militant nephew. Both readily forsake family privileges to devote themselves to the struggle; their capacity for sacrifice and the readiness with which they forfeit their privileges are shown to debunk the stereotype of Indians as a privileged group, obsessed only with making money. For Govender as for Hassim, 'blood sacrifice' becomes the ideal mode of inscribing belonging and citizenship. Just as Jake is returned home in a coffin having been tortured by agents of the Security Branch, Guru's body is returned home riddled with bullets as he attempts to engage the apartheid repressive machinery militarily. The cause for which they give their lives cements their relationship with the South African soil.

In the struggle, articulation of a 'black' identity is constructed as particularly desirable in presenting a common front against apartheid in the face of the regime's 'divide and rule' policy. In keeping with the policy, the apartheid regime and the British colonial authority before it, as Govinden notes, entrenched a European cultural hegemony under which both indigenous and indentured peoples were rendered as foreigners and systematically 'Othered.' The end of the anti-apartheid struggle has thus been to ensure that Africans, Indians and Coloureds belong to South Africa alongside the English and Afrikaners (Govinden 2008: 81). Govender's novel is given to the realisation of this all-embracing nation as succinctly captured by Guru in his view that 'Indians need to identify more with the African people if they are to secure the future of their children' (Govender 2006: 269). This is the same politics held by Michael Mbele, a coloured who chooses to identify himself as a 'native.' It contrasts sharply with Chin's

stance on politics. When he is invited to join the Cape Branch of the Indian Congress, Chin opines that a political union with the ANC in the fight against racism might 'make things more difficult for the Indians' (Govender 2006: 250). Chin's view is shared by many Indian traders (Govender 2006: 270). As in *The Lotus People*, the generational politics pits the young, who are far more radicalised, against their older counterparts, who are reluctant to join the struggle. Where Guru finds his uncle's anti-apartheid zeal wanting, he looks up to activists such as Velliammah Moodley and Thumbi Naidoo and many other unsung heroes and heroines who lost their lives in the struggle against colonialism and the colour bar. Through their 'blood sacrifice,' they demonstrated inspiring patriotism and secured their place in a South Africa that their children can share.

This vision of a non-racial South Africa is, however, undermined by the suspicion that the Indian business class harbour towards Africans. When Guru tells Chin that his decision to return to Durban to set up an ANC cell is prompted by apartheid injustices and the destruction of Cato Manor and the impending destruction of District Six, Chin shoots back:

What can you do about it? What can you, as an Indian, do about it? Just be thankful of what you have. Look at me, look at all these. We are living well. What more do you want? Indians are caught up in between. If the black people get into power you won't have a chance. Look at what happened during the 1949 riots ... (Govender 2006: 308 - 309).

As in *The Lotus People*, the 1949 riots become a watershed moment in defining Indo-African relations. Fed by white prejudice, the riots underline the difficulty of non-racial alliance, calculated as it is to justify apartheid's legalisation of racial separation (Maharaj 2009: 84). Remembering the riots underlies much of the anxieties that Indians have about the post-apartheid present and their perceived vulnerability within it, arising from a general distrust of 'black people.' Chin's angst about the *prospect* of the 'black people' in the seat of power and his complacency risk affirming the stereotype of Indians as sympathisers and beneficiaries of racial injustice, a stereotype around which Africans were quickly mobilised against Indians during the riots (Maharaj 2008: 85). Narrated from the vantage point of the

post-apartheid moment, the memory of the 1949 riots invites a critical re-examination of race-relations in the interest of forestalling a repeat of similar outbursts. Chin's emphasis on an unhyphenated Indian identity is similarly met with Guru's categorical disavowal of the same in favour of his South African identity (Govender 2006: 309). The evocation of Black Consciousness's non-racialism that is implicit here warrants a re-examination of the past to legitimate claims that are being made in the moment of narrating.

Conclusion

Coovadia's, Hassim's and Govinden's novels emerge as products of a post-apartheid moment, which under the 'rainbow nation' project witnesses the supplanting of the politics of non-racial alliance by that of ethnic self-assertion. The novels evince increasing awareness that the assertion of blackness as the logic of an anti-apartheid struggle risks effacing Indianness that, as Rastogi notes, was 'already made fragile by migration and public invisibility' (2008: 26). Despite these shifts, the anxieties that the post-apartheid moment presents have, for Indian South African writers, occasioned the urgency to reconstitute the pasts that Indians share in a bid to legitimise their belonging and citizenship claims. The narrativisation of these histories reveals the remaking of Indianness by conditions of rootedness in ways that simultaneously bolster Indians' claim on South Africa. The desire for a particularly redeeming history that these authors articulate thus demands a keen sensitivity to their novels as products of particular historical and political forces.

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Constructing Identity through Island Places in Dalene Matthee's *Pieterella, Daughter of Eva*

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Abstract

The discourse of postcolonialism, feminism and ecocriticism forms the critical matrix for the analysis of a recent South African novel, Dalene Matthee's *Pieterella, Daughter of Eva* (2008). These ideas allow for an interrogation of the complex interactions between place and identity formation in the text. Matthee constructs both historical and geographical spaces in her novel which position her subject in a delicate balance between oppressive environmental forces on the one hand and sustaining forces of nature on the other. Her struggle for self-affirmation highlights the complexity of the interaction between place and identity in seventeenth century colonial society, a contestation that resonates with the present.

Key concepts: place, identity, island spaces, ecocriticism, South African Literature

Dalene Matthee is well-known for her series of 'Forest Stories', particularly the first volume, *Circles in a Forest* (1984). These novels raised awareness, both locally and internationally, of the Knysna forest environment and its people. In a similar way to the forest novels, Matthee imaginatively recreates island spaces in her novel, *Pieterella, Daughter of Eva* (2008) whose narrative is largely played out on the islands of Mauritius and Robben Island. Like in the earlier trilogy, Matthee draws on the interrelationship of history

and space in her construction of the narrative, and in this study, I will be focusing essentially on the way human lives are shown to be intertwined with the various environments in her novel. I will show that the island environments are represented in the text in such a way that they co-construct the identity of the people who occupy them.

Island spaces and their cultural significance are attracting increasing interest in contemporary scholarship, as is evidenced by the recent *Navigating the Indian Ocean* colloquium and associated publications¹. At this forum attention was focused on the importance of the Indian Ocean as a place of social and historical transformation. As Pamila Gupta puts it, ‘In the act of crossing the Indian Ocean, people transformed places and formed new identities’ (Gupta 2010:3). Particularly significant are the islands in the Indian Ocean as they are surrounded by the ocean, and therefore most affected by the larger transcontinental historical and social forces and flows that impinge on them. The concept of ‘islandness’ (Gupta 2010:4) therefore seems to be particularly useful in understanding the significance of the spatial parameters of Matthee’s novel. Some brief thoughts on island spaces in general and the particular islands under discussion will follow. My main purpose is to analyse how the island spaces affect the constitution of identity of the novel’s main character, Pieterella. This will lead to some thoughts on the broad theme of the interaction between place and identity.

The main feature of an island space is its isolation from the mainland (island being a word derived from the Latin *insula*). This isolation can be perceived both positively or negatively. In terms of the western literary tradition, ‘the island is an ambivalent symbol, a utopia or a dystopia or some combination of the two’ (Addison 2002:75). This ambivalent aspect of island isolation is clearly evident in the two locales that Matthee’s novel utilizes, namely Mauritius and Robben Island. In the case of the former, the novel here draws on the contemporary significance of the islands as a remote place of leisure, a holiday destination characterised by beaches, palm trees and coral reefs. Gupta however also cautions us about the dark side of this supposedly idyllic locale: Mauritius can also be understood as a site of

¹ The papers from this colloquium have been published under the title: *Eyes Across the Water: Navigating the Indian Ocean*, edited by Pamila Gupta, Isabel Hofmeyr & Michael Pearson, Pretoria: Unisa Press (2010).

‘paradise lost through global tourism’ (Gupta 2010:275). The negative and dystopian idea of the island is signified most powerfully by Robben Island, a locale that is central to South African history:

In its small, wave-beaten boundaries Robben Island holds the memories of a nation and the legends of the greatest and weakest of South Africans. The Island has been the subject of books, poems, plays and a vast oral mythology. Better known as ‘Esiquithini’ (the Island) to the three generations of political prisoners who occupied it in the second half of the 20th century, it carries the scars of four centuries of human suffering and triumph (Smith 1997:5).

In the historical period dealt with in the novel, Robben Island was not yet the notorious political prison which it became in the 20th century, but housed so-called ‘lepers’ and ‘lunatics’, and generally served as a ‘repository for those who were considered dangerous to the social order’ (Deacon 1996:8).

Although Robben Island and Mauritius are not spatially or culturally connected today in any significant way, Matthee’s novel allows us to recognize significant historical links and oceanic connections. In the seventeenth century, both islands were connected by their common colonial relationship to the mainland of Europe, falling under the rule of Holland and the Lords Seventeen (Gupta 2010:276). Both islands had come under the authority of the Dutch East Indian Company in the 1600s, and were used to supply food and refreshment for the Company’s ships that were engaged in the long journeys to the east for the spice trade. The Dutch East India Company created an inter-oceanic network which linked spatially distant islands under the same ideology and control to form the basis for colonial and capitalistic expansion. The western counterpart of this Dutch trading company, incidentally, was responsible for the initial settling of New York on Manhattan Island, adding yet another significant island to the east-west network.

Robben Island is important in Matthee’s novel because of Pieternella’s mother, Krotoa-Eva who was strongly associated with that place. Krotoa-Eva is an important figure in the history of South Africa. One of the indigenous inhabitants of pre-colonial Africa, Krotoa’s life story focuses attention on the complexity of cultural exchange in the very early

days of European settlement in the Cape. As a young girl, Krotoa learnt to speak Dutch and became part of Jan van Riebeeck's household. Re-named Eva, she became his main interpreter in his negotiations with various local people of the Cape such as the Goringhaicona tribe. She was born on Robben Island and later lived there with her Danish husband, Pieter van Meerhof. After his death she was banished there:

... on several occasions they imprisoned her on Robben Island, seven and a half miles from Cape Town. Cold and windswept, with a dangerous rocky coastline that caused frequent shipwrecks over the years, the island would later house South Africa's most famous political prisoners. There Eva died a lonely death in 1674 (Berger 2009:23).

Krotoa-Eva's identity, like her double name, is divided between African and European culture. Deela Khan, a contemporary South African poet, clearly condemns the way Krotoa was treated in her poem, *Engaging the Shades of Robben Island*:

Robbed of her Khoikhoi identity at eight
Krotoa, *pygmalioned* into a Dutch girl,
was baptized and re-named Eva.
Subtly programmed to manipulate and betray
her people and to serve the Dutch East India Company
Krotoa became the most spirited traitor-diplomat of her time
(2002:23).

Khan's word 'pygmalioned' alludes to the idea of the transformation of identity from a low-class, uneducated, uncouth female to a refined and sophisticated lady. Khan's italics indicate the heavily ironic tone, undercutting any positive associations and stressing the colonial metanarrative of 'civilizing' the natives. Priya Narismulu, in her review of this poem, points out the convergences between postcolonialism and ecofeminism in Khan's poem. She says, 'Ecofeminists address questions of how people are treated in the context of how nature is treated, and these concerns inform ecofeminist critiques of patriarchal science' (2009:267).

Trudie Bloem, in her well-researched historical novel, *Krotoa-Eva, Woman from Robben Island*, gives a more complex view of the process of cultural integration where Krotoa is not seen as a victim but rather as someone who chooses to learn about the European way of life and is admired (at first) by surrounding tribes because of her influential position. She does not simply betray her people but tries to keep peace between them and the Dutch. In spite of her marriage to Van Meerhof, she was never really accepted in Dutch society, especially after her protectors, the Van Riebeecks, left the Cape. Berger writes of her ‘ambivalent position as an indigenous woman trying to live in European society’ (2009:23). Eva was tragically caught between two cultures, and became marginal to both.

Krotoa-Eva captured the imagination of Dalene Matthee. In an interview with Herman Wasserman (*Die Burger* 12 March, 2000) she said that she wanted to write about her for decades, but somehow the story didn’t take life². Matthee acknowledges her indebtedness to her co-researcher, Dan Sleigh, who suggested that she use the young Pieterella as a medium through which the portrait of Eva could be constructed.

While the English title of this narrative stresses the relationship between Pieterella and her mother, the Afrikaans title stresses ‘place’ as the identifying characteristic: *Pieterella van die Kaap*. These titles give an indication of how Matthee holds in balance two ways of constructing the self. There is the social construction of self, based on close family relationship and moving out from there to other social bonds. Then there is the place-based self, which may be influenced by social construction but is also strongly influenced by the natural environment. It is closely related to the ‘ecological self’, a term used by Freya Mathews and adopted by Dan Wylie in his discussion of the connection between the self and ecology:

In conjoining ecology and identity I have in mind primarily Freya Mathews’s elaboration of what she calls the ‘ecological self’, a conception of the self not as a purely autonomous, self-regulating

² ‘Ek het dekades gelede al besluit dat ek oor Eva wil skryf, maar sy het bly doodgaan. Sy het maar net nie bloed gekry, siel gekry nie’ [Decades ago I decided that I want to write about Eva, but she kept dying. She just didn’t get blood, a soul.] (see also Erika Terblanche 2009).

entity ontologically independent of external stimuli, but an individual ‘whose autonomy and integrity are a function of its interconnectedness with its environment’ (Wylie 2008:81; Mathews 1994:108).

I am using the term ‘nature’ in this article to depict the nonhuman environment: that part of the environment which is not built by human hands and that exists independently of people. I am also contrasting it with the social environment, which deals with interaction between humans in both the private and the public sphere. While I acknowledge that representations of nature are socially constructed, I maintain that the difference between interacting with people and interacting with the nonhuman world is a crucial factor in the construction of identity³.

As the narrative unfolds, Pieternella is moved from her place of birth and early childhood and is sent away to Mauritius. I will look at the three stages in Pieternella’s journey: her childhood on Robben Island, her passage on the ship and lastly, her life on Mauritius and I will trace the corresponding shifts in her identity in each place.

Place-based literary analysis focuses on the way *place* influences the construction of the self. As James Tyner says, ‘the constitution of self *takes place*: it occurs in a particular landscape’ and so ‘It is a matter of *who we are* through a concern with *where we are*’ (Tyner 2005:261). There is an intricate dialectic between the way in which the representation of *place* is constructed from many different viewpoints in the narrative, and the way *place* in its turn acts on the self⁴.

The term ‘identity’ has been challenged by postmodern critics: ‘For the postmoderns, identity is suspect, a throwback to the errors of modernism’ (Hekman 2004:187). James Tyner points out that ‘post-colonial and post-

³ A description of the term ‘Nature’ is given in *Spaces of PostModernity*: ‘Nature serves either as the raw material upon which humans act to create value (in an economic sense), or a realm outside culture that is both threateningly unpredictable and vulnerable to desecration by human intrusion (Dear & Flusty 2002:423).

⁴ For further discussion on the relation between text and place, see Bertrand Westphal, *Geocriticism*.

structural work calls into question the concepts of identity and individuality. This is seen, for example, in the theoretical move toward ‘subjectivity’ as opposed to ‘identity’ and ‘individuality’ (2005:260). However, Hekman points out that ‘even Judith Butler tentatively admits in her recent work, we ‘appear to require’ identity to function in society’ (2004:187). Hekman goes on to say that

social norms define our identities; they define us as normal or deviant, moral or immoral. What do I do if the identity I am given by my society is not viable, defining me as deviant or even subhuman? I cannot appeal to my ‘true nature’ and thus reject the identity imposed on me. What I can argue is that we should conceive of my identity in another way. I can resist the identity in society’s script (2004:115).

My purpose in this paper is to argue that another way to conceive of identity in order to ‘resist the identity in society’s script’ is to turn to ‘place’, and especially the natural environment. The connection between the female and nature has been severely criticized by feminist theorists, but Material Feminists such as Stacey Alaimo have pointed out that this criticism has brought problems of its own:

[T]he detrimental associations between woman and nature in Western thought have driven most feminists to extricate ‘woman’ from the category of ‘nature.’ Motivated in part by the desire to combat essentialism, this strategy actually solidifies the very ground of essentialism because it reinforces the notion that nature is everything that culture is not. The feminist flight from nature fails to transform the terrain of struggle, leaving in place the very associations – with stasis, with passivity, with abject matter – that have made nature a hazardous terrain for feminism (2000:135).

The first stage of Pieternella’s identity formation takes place on Robben Island and the mainland of the Cape. When her mother is banished to Robben Island, she takes Pieternella with her. Two contrasting pictures of this island emerge from the narrative: the island as place of banishment and

the island as place of nature. The first idea is illustrated in the following:

Eva, unless your behaviour improves, we will banish you to Mauritius! That's how they used to threaten her mother. First you are dumped on Robben Island to rid the Cape of vermin, and if you still won't behave, they banish you to the second rubbish pit: Mauritius (2008:5).

If the islands are figured as rubbish pits in the discourse of Dutch society, then Pieterella and her mother are identified as rubbish or vermin. The narrative voice that Matthee constructs for Pieterella contains both a childlike defensiveness and an adult bitterness. It also suggests Krotoa's voice coming through her daughter's words. These utterances exemplify the extent to which their sense of self is threatened in this place. However, Pieterella also recalls watching her mother making a clay pot which has to be fired, which shows a side of her which is allied to her Goringhaikona heritage:

Her mother was speaking to the fire. Not Dutch. She only spoke Dutch to the children because they were Dutch children from the Cape. With the fire, she spoke fire-talk. *Click-click-click*. Like gravel being shaken deep inside a clay pot, with snatches of bird-talk in between ... (2008:20).

Eva's communication with the fire and the birds convey what I would argue to be her 'ecological self' – that part of her which is firmly based in the *place* of the Cape, both in the African cultural practice and her easy identification with the natural environment. When the pot is ready we have images of nature on Robben Island:

Bending over the pot as she started scraping out the ash, her mother clucked away just like the mother quail on Robben Island always clucked over her chicks as they crept in under her wings in the evening (2008:20).

The image of the quail indicates that Pieterella has an intimate knowledge

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of wild places on the island and speaks of an attitude of patient observation and protectiveness. This quiet natural image stands in stark contrast to the way the island is reflected in the condemnatory communal voice of Dutch society.

In the novel, Robben Island is thus constructed as both a place of dumping 'rubbish' and a place of nurturing new life. The texts thus follows the historical record which shows the island not only as a place of banishment, but it is also a place of provision, at least in the early days when it still had resources to offer. Deacon reminds us that the 'Island and its shores have suffered almost continuous exploitation of their natural resources' (1996:1). From historical records we can corroborate the image of the island as a place where natural resources are harvested for the benefit of the Dutch settlers in Cape Town (and the Portuguese before them):

In many respects Robben Island was a safer, more reliable refreshment option than the mainland of Table Bay. In the first place the Island was devoid of humans whereas the mainland was inhabited by the Khoikhoi. . . . Even when the Khoikhoi were not provoked to hostility they were not always either keen or available to barter their precious flocks and herds for the iron and trinkets of the Europeans (Penn 1992:7).

According to Jan van Riebeeck's Journal, cormorants, penguins and their eggs were used to supplement the diet of workers at the Castle. 'The yacht returned from the Robben Island,' he wrote, 'bringing back about a hundred black birds called duikers, which taste good; *item* some penguins and about 3,000 eggs, all of which we distributed among the men to serve to some extent as refreshment and by way of a change' (13th September, 1652). Less than two years later, however, the population of penguins had diminished so much that Van Riebeeck had to reduce the amount consumed daily:

we gave orders that henceforth instead of thrice daily, food should be served only twice: at ten o'clock in the morning, for breakfast, cabbage and greens with a little bacon boiled with it to give some flavour; and in the evening, 1/2 penguin per person' (16th April, 1654).

Seals, too, were over-exploited for their skins and oil until there were none left. We are reminded that the name Robben comes from the Dutch word 'rob' for seal, as the island was identified as the place of seals.

In addition, shells from Robben Island were collected and shipped over to the mainland where they were crushed and used to make limestone to build the castle and other structures. Thus the popular notion of the island being a rubbish pit is outweighed by the facts of its identity of supplier of natural resources to the settlement of Cape Town. Matthee uses the image of the building process in the Cape to convey Pieterella's sense of her mixed heritage:

Building lime was one bucket of shell lime to one bucket of sand. She, Jacobus and Salomon were one bucket of tallow-brown sand and one bucket of white sand. Actually snow-white sand. Their father came from a snow country far across the sea. Denmark (2008:28).

In these images Matthee conveys a sense of self that is closely connected to place: to the colour of the soil, linking identity with the earth. Pieterella's sense of self differs from her mother's in that it is racially mixed. She has an ambivalent attitude towards her African heritage from the Goringhaicona people and attempts to resist the negative and derogatory label, Hottentot, as we can see in this interchange with her brother:

[Brother] 'Maybe we're bad children because Mamma was a Hottentot?'

[Pieterella] 'Stop it, I said!'
 He wouldn't. But we're not Hottentots, are we?'
 'No.' (2008:2).

Pieterella tries to claim superior status on the basis of what she has been taught, for example, eating with a spoon and not her hands. However, there are aspects of the Goringhaicona culture which her mother teaches her, and that become precious to her, like for example, the making of the pot as seen above. Pieterella's Robben Island identity is thus a fractured and contested one. It takes its form from the colours and textures of the natural

environment of the island but it is also attacked from the outside by the voices of Dutch authority. She suffers a double marginalization: first as a woman secondly as a person of mixed race⁵. Nevertheless she has a strong sense of belonging to the Cape, and as such, she desperately resists being sent away, which brings us to the next stage in Pieternella's journey: on the boat, the Boode.

The boat functions like a floating island and it corresponds with a stage in Pieternella's life where her identity is in a sense floating as well. Her Cape identity which formed the basis of her childhood is wrenched away from her as she is forced to leave the place she knows. The extent to which this move affects her is expressed by her words as she gets on board the ship, 'I just want to go back to where my body is waiting for me on the quay' (2008:61). This conveys a profound sense of dis-location and fragmentation. It is as if her body, or her Cape 'self', is waiting for her and this other, disembodied and identity-less self is on the boat.

However, there are aspects of her known world which sustain her. She takes on to the boat a fragment of the broken pot which she and her mother made. Her mattress is stuffed with 'Hottentot' herbs which she can smell to remind her of her home. Once on board the ship, she is horrified by the dark and airless space she has to live in with the other women. The lower class of passenger had to sleep in the hold which had no ventilation or toilet facilities. This was where Pieternella had to stay. She endures many hardships but the worst perhaps were the insults and prejudices heaped on her because of her mixed race. Even the Dutch woman who was convicted of robbery, and therefore has no real social standing, looks down on Pieternella and orders her around. She is treated as a personal slave to these women even though in moral terms Pieternella is a far better person. However, Pieternella manages to find fragile links to the land and her previous life on the deck of the ship where the live sheep were kept:

Someone had thrown a sheaf of green fodder to the sheep. Stupid man, didn't know frightened sheep wouldn't simply eat. Wooden

⁵ 'Pieternella is dubbel gemarginaliseer binne die sewentiende-eeuse samelewing: eerstens as vrou en tweedens as iemand van gemengde afkoms' (Van Zyl 2003:61).

water trough. If she, Pieterella, crept into the farthest corner of the pen, she wouldn't be in anybody's way.

For thirty-eighty days?

She smelt the sheep, closed her eyes and clung to the warm smell.

She didn't want to be on the ship! (2008:56).

With the sheep she can escape the alienation from human society and begin to construct a transient identity. It is not fixed or stable, but it is not completely lost. It is suspended for the moment, just as the ship is suspended on the surface of the water – the wooden goose, as she calls it, or in bad moments, the wooden coffin. It is almost as if it hovers above her, just as the albatross that hovers above the ship on its journey. This bird too becomes a sustaining force on her journey and an emblem of transcendence.

One distinctive aspect of living on a boat and enduring the hardships it involves is that it throws people together, both literally and figuratively. Because of the enclosed space she comes into close contact with people of a higher class such as Monsieur Lamotius and his wife, Juffrouw Sofia, and also Daniel Zaaijman, the cooper. At a time of extremity, for example in a storm when people face death, they reveal parts of their identity that may have remained hidden in less trying circumstances. Pieterella's behaviour is noticed by Zaaijman, who decides later to make her his wife, thus transforming her social identity from a semi-servant in the Borms's household to a person of moderately high standing in Dutch society. This constitutes the third and final stage of Pieterella's identity construction on Mauritius.

Mauritius itself is a similarly ambivalent or multivalent space to Robben Island. It is a place of banishment, as criminals and non-desirable people are sent there to be out of the way of the Dutch society in Cape Town. On the other hand, it supports the trading enterprise of the Company by providing food and shelter for ships as they pass through the dangerous waters of the Indian Ocean. The island's natural resources are thoroughly exploited by the Company as the burghers are instructed to send tons of ebony to Holland. The Lords Seventeen make these demands even though the people on the island are not provided with the necessary tools such as saw-blades to fell the trees. Thus the island becomes a place of hardship for people who fall under the harsh authority of the Dutch officials. 'The island

was not a people place,' the narrator says (Matthee 2008:294). There were many restrictions on hunting and fishing, as well as public floggings for those who disobeyed orders.

For Pieternella, however, it is a place of new discoveries. Daniel Zaaijman takes her out on a little boat and tries to persuade her to enter the water. In a sense he extends the space of the island to include the underwater world of tropical fish, live shells and coral: 'Not real fish like kabeljou and steenbras and other fish you ate. Little play-play fishes. Fishes with all kinds of silly bodies under the clear water, and the strangest pointy pebbles: red, white, pink. Almost like colewort' (2008:298). Her reference points here are to the fish she knew on the other island where fish were seen only as food. On this island she is introduced to a different way of knowing nature: seeing its strangeness and giving it a value beyond its utility.

Matthee constructs Pieternella's new identity in Mauritius using an image of a quail's egg: 'Yesterday she was still a speckled egg in a quail's nest. During the night the shell round her broke open and out she crept' (2008:280). This image refers back to her mother's clucking talk to the pot and reinforces the connection between her and her mother, through the medium of nature. It also reflects in microcosm the space of the island which is surrounded by its 'shell' of the sea.

Daniel's own identity is transformed under the water and he becomes 'A Daniel she didn't know. Fish man, water man, with the most beautiful, the happiest of faces' (2008:298). Previously, on the boat, Daniel was referred to as 'the jackal-haired man'. While this image is not threatening, it is predatory, especially with regard to sheep. Here all vestiges of the predatory are washed away. On the island Daniel plays the role of healer of ships as when he caulks a leaking ship, or the 'wooden goose'. When they untie the ropes that hold the ship on its side, it comes up again: 'Slowly the wooden goose righted itself in the water. Like being healed' (2008:346).

Pieternella too develops the identity of healer while on the island. This is one aspect of Krotoa's Khoi identity that remains strong and is passed down to her daughter. Pieternella in her turn uses herbs and plants of the island to heal people and earns respect from the community while living on Mauritius. Her marriage to Daniel Zaaijman is shown to be happy when they are alone in nature but Pieternella has a secret fear that her Khoi racial identity will show itself in her children. Each time she has a child, she is

anxious about its colour and what the community of settlers on the island will say. She reports a conversation with one of the Dutch women, Tant Theuntjie:

Tant Theuntjie suddenly looked at her suspiciously and asked: Pieterrella, are you expecting? That was February, she was hardly showing yet. Yes, Tante. Then you'd better start praying that it's not going to be too much of a little Hottentot (2008:292).

Matthee shows how racial prejudice is conveyed almost inadvertently by the Dutch woman. She is paying a 'friendly' visit to Pieterrella and is probably unaware of how much the word 'Hottentot' upsets her. However to counteract this attack on Pieterrella's sense of social belonging, not for herself alone but also for her unborn child, Matthee directs the narrative towards a sense of belonging to place. This follows from her connection to nature. Interestingly, this is facilitated through her slave, Anna, a local woman from the island. Although this woman is lower on the social hierarchy than Pieterrella, she is a powerful presence and obtains a sense of authority from her knowledge of the island's natural environment. For instance, whenever a cyclone is about to hit the island, this woman goes off by herself and hides in the forest. She gives Pieterrella's household an early warning signal so that they too can prepare themselves for what could otherwise devastate their home. When Pieterrella gives birth to her first child, Anna takes the baby to the door of the house:

'Anna, what are you doing now? Suddenly, she was uneasy.
'The child has to go outside so the sun can see her, so her blood-land can greet her.'
'Please, don't take her away!'
'Don't be frightened. Anna will take her only as far as the door. Anna knows.'
She took her only as far as the door.
Like a baptism (2008:314).

This action can be seen as a baptism of place which endows the child with an island identity. It suggests that the sense of belonging is not something which

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comes from a person but instead is given by the place. The island here acts as a substitute for a priest. Anna also takes Pieternella to some special white-bark trees on the island, which only ‘bleed’ every second year:

All over, under the trees, in among the fallen leaves and scraps of bark and twigs, lay little ripe, black-purple fruits like fat little fingers.

‘Pick up and eat.’ Like the words of the Holy Communion. ‘Eat the blood of the island so the child will also have the blood’ (2008:292).

Later we read that this action confirms Pieternella’s sense of belonging to the island. Before this she had hoped to go back to the Cape, but after the exchange of ‘blood’ we read: ‘No, she didn’t want to go back to the Cape. Never again. The island had accepted her early in the year, because Anna had made her eat some of its blood. This was now her place, her fatherland, her mother country’ (2008:291). This episode can be read as an entanglement of the human and the nonhuman environment, effecting a strangely transformative shift in identity.. Matthee constructs nature on the island as having agency, of being able to destroy but also to give reassurance, which in turn creates a space of resistance for Pieternella in the racist society.

In conclusion, Matthee’s narrative encompasses a wide range of critical debates and issues. It can be read in the broad context of postcolonial ecocriticism, involving the exploitation of natural resources and indigenous people as well as the marginalization of people of mixed races. Louise Viljoen remarks that place-based studies of literary texts have an important contribution to make to postcolonial literary criticism⁶. In Matthee’s novel it seems that the two ways of constructing self, socially-based and place-based, are difficult to separate from one another. However, by taking the concept of *place* to be more than simply a background for the characters, it allows an ecocritical sense of interaction between the human and nonhuman elements

⁶ ‘... dat ‘n fokus op plek en landskap betekenisvol kan bydra tot die spesifisering wat nodig is binne die diskoers oor postkolonialisme.’ [Focus on place and landscape can make a meaningful contribution to the specification that is required in the discourse on postcolonialism.] (74).

in the narrative to emerge. Not only is the sense of self affected by the environment but the self, and in particular, the body, creates the environment in different ways. In Pieter Conradie's discussion of the theatrical representation of Krotoa-Eva's life he points out the interaction between nature and the self: 'The abundant celebration of nature in her songs and dance movements becomes a celebration of the body as it 'writes' the outside world' (Conradie 1997:71).

This place-based analysis of Matthee's novel also brings the geocritical aspect of islands into conversation with emerging themes in Indian Ocean Studies. Places such as the two islands under discussion have multiple-identities: Mauritius as a place of banishment but also a place of healing and re-construction. Perhaps the connection with nature, the 'undomesticated ground' in Alaimo's terms, is the thread that binds Pieterella's identity into a coherent whole. She attains an ecological-self, to use Freya Mathews' term, in Mauritius, which enables her to resist the damaging aspects of the European social script.

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Of Shorelines, Borderlines and Shipwrecks in Justin Fox's *The Marginal Safari: Scouting the Edge of South Africa*

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Abstract

Justin Fox's *The Marginal Safari: Scouting the Edge of South Africa* (2010) is a travelogue which takes the entire South African borderline as its setting. The book relates a six week long one man trip around South Africa's border which Fox embarks on during the winter of 2004. His 'journey was along that confusing strip where South Africa surrendered to the biological Other and became ocean' (2010:27). Fox's exploration of South Africa's turbulent maritime history which first opened her up for trade and eventually colonisation shows that the sea and land exist in a complex symbiotic-parasitic relation. Shorelines for Fox are 'permeable zones where inter-tidal critters, animals, plants and birds of both realms reside' (2010:27). I argue that although Fox's travelogue is one man's search for identity along South Africa's margins, especially the shorelines, the narrative also rehearses the fluidity of the national project for new identities in the post-apartheid environment. I also argue that Fox's obsession with the stories of salvaging wrecked ships is a metaphor for his quest for what it means to be white in the post-apartheid state. Fox's narrative demonstrates that South Africa's margins, be they land borders or shore lines, mimic the ocean in that they are in 'flux and contested' (2010:69), and as Margaret Cohen has observed, to 'survive in such spaces of dynamic, incomplete, expanding knowledge requires consummate skill in the arts of action' (2010:660). Since Fox himself calls his circumnavigation a 'record of an evolving relationship with the land' (2010:49), this enables me to point out that the transitional South

Africa that Fox depicts in his narrative, like Cohen's sea, can be seen as a space of vibrancy, incompleteness and knowledge expansion requiring a continuous search for new ways of being.

Keywords: Justin Fox, Shorelines, borderlines, travelogue, identity, whiteness, post-apartheid literature, ecology.

Justin Fox's *The Marginal Safari: Scouting the Edge of South Africa* (2010) which is divided into three sections titled, 'East Coast', 'The Border Run' and 'West Coast', relates a six-week long one-man trip around South Africa's shoreline and border which the author embarked on during the winter of 2004. Starting from Cape Town where he lives beside a lighthouse when not travelling, Fox heads northeast 'hugging the east coast as far as Mozambique' (2010: 14). He stays very close to the coast and avoids the well-trodden national and regional roads as much as he can. The coastline is interesting to Fox because he thinks of it largely in metaphorical terms. He calls it a frontier whose boundary is 'never fixed and [where] border disputes over territory and taxes continue forever: the sea getting the upper hand at high tide, the land making its point at low water' (2010:27). Reaching Kosi Bay where South Africa shares a border with Mozambique, Fox then grudgingly heads inland as the South African coastline ends. He however sticks to South Africa's borderline as much as roads will allow.

Interestingly, for Fox, borderlines resemble the shoreline because '[f]rontiers are seldom distinct boundary lines but rather territories, often in flux and contested. It's where rival societies interpenetrate and compete, sometimes peacefully, often violently' (2010:69). For him, borderlands are 'fundamentally places of change', spaces where 'one's culture is confronted with alternative ideas, where one is forced into the imagination, picturing other possibilities' (2010: 128). Moving along South Africa's borders with Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Botswana and Namibia allows Fox to think of conservational efforts through national parks and the recent establishment of transnational frontier parks. He travels along the South African-Botswana and the South Africa-Namibia borders until he reaches the Atlantic coast at Alexander Bay. Filled with trepidation at meeting his ailing father, he sticks to the shipwreck littered South African west coast as he heads back for Cape

Town. The imminent death of his architect father, who has just been diagnosed with terminal cancer, casts a long shadow on the expedition, but also provides Fox with a theme which he expertly threads into the existential concerns of his travelogue. His father is also seen in terms of the shoreline or borderline. Fox feels that, literally and metaphorically speaking, his father largely determines who he is. He writes: 'My dad and his *patria* were always one, even in bad years' (2010:70). Unlike his father's unwavering patriotism to both the old and new imagined South African nation, Fox sees himself as belonging to a white generation that is 'more questioning, unsure about where to fit in' (2010:70). Using what I have called, after Blumenberg (1997), the metaphors of the perilous sea voyage, I argue that in *The Marginal Safari*, Fox grapples with questions of belonging and alienation that afflict him as a privileged white South African. While Fox's entire narrative may be seen as structured by the metaphors of seafaring and the littoral, it is especially in the travelogue's two sections titled, 'East Coast' and 'West Coast', that Fox seems to think more intensely about his identity and the future of South Africa in relation to shipwrecks and ship salvaging, surfing the sea waves, conservation of the littoral flora and fauna and other broader ecological concerns.

Fox's travelogue is part of an emerging post-1994 South African subgenre which in Pratt's terms can be called 'an anti-conquest narrative' (2008:38). Similarly, William Dicey's *Borderline* (2004) is another travelogue which seems to fit into this category. Starting from the whites only South African town of Orania, Dicey and his two friends canoe all the way to the mouth of the Orange River in the Atlantic Ocean. While clearly mimicking Robert Gordon's 1779 journey of discovery, Dicey's narrative tries to subvert the discredited patronising colonial travellers' gaze by jettisoning its totalising tendencies. Dicey's travelogue attempts to recover the marginalised histories of the indigenous populations as they encountered the coloniser around the Orange River. Mary Campbell (1988:7) argues that in the case of the Americas, European journeys of discovery were dangerously allied with the extermination of the indigenous populations. Dicey's and Fox's narratives also acknowledge the same about the history of South Africa as they self-consciously set out to debunk the 'overtly imperial articulations of conquest, conversion, territorial appropriation, and enslavement' (Pratt 2008:38) that were eulogised in most of the nineteenth century

Europeans' travelogues about Southern Africa. Among other things, in *The Marginal Safari*, Fox addresses South Africa's apartheid past through the lens of a rapidly globalising post-apartheid environment. By its focus on littoral ecology and the conservation of South Africa's flora and fauna, Fox's narrative suggests that post-1994 South Africa has to confront the political legacies of apartheid in the complex context of global concerns about conservation and sustainable use of earth's natural resources. The book attempts to offer what Debbie Lisle has called a 'cosmopolitan vision' (2006:4) because Fox tries to dispense with apartheid and colonial stereotypes in his encounters with what he views as strange. The travelogue explores the disquieting legacies of the apartheid past and in many ways offers a criticism of the colonial travelogues which participated in the process of conquest through their claims of exploration and 'discoveries'. By doing this, Fox seems to acknowledge the fact that 'no work on travel can exclude the important matter of subject formation, ideology, and imperialism [for doing that would be to] reiterate imperial gestures of unreflexive objective, anthropological, and scientific representation' (Grewal 1996: 2).

Lisle suggests that despite the self-conscious effort of the travel writer to be apolitical, travelogues are always subtle political acts. She argues that 'travelogues express political commitments that are barely visible beyond their received status as minor literary genre' (2006:1). In this light, my essay explores how Fox reflects on the epistemologies and power systems embedded in the very practice of the kind of journey that he undertakes and the practice of travel writing. I argue that in a number of ways Fox can be seen as smuggling in 'judgemental accounts of otherness *under the guise* of equality, tolerance and respect for difference' (Lisle 2006:10; emphasis in the original) just like his colonial predecessors. Utilising Tabish Khair's keen observation that definitions of both travel and travel writing emphasise the notion of exploration and that this idea itself is 'embedded in a distinctive cultural and historical experience: that of the European age of expansion and colonization stretching from the fifteenth century to the twentieth' (2006: 5), I point out that Fox's book inscribes itself in the colonial travelogues' representational problematics in subtle but disturbing ways. Grewal argues that 'travel is a metaphor that ... became an ontological discourse central to the relations between Self and Other,

between different forms of alterity [and] between nationalisms ... races, and classes' (1996: 2). Fox claims that his travelogue is 'almost the opposite of traditional travel writing' (2010:71) because he is writing about his own land or his father's land. He observes that in traditional travel writing that concerns foreign lands the task is simple because '[s]tereotypes congeal readily, national traits reveal themselves unbidden, the narrative writes itself' (2010:71). This suggests a tenuous awareness that by embarking on his circumnavigation of South Africa and the very act of writing a travelogue in a way positions Fox as an outsider to the land he claims as his own. Despite its overt disclaimers, Fox's narrative is plagued by the kind of problematic depiction that in nineteenth century travelogues sought to present a natural history of Southern Africa devoid of indigenous people and structured communities. Debbie Lisle argues that 'travel writing is profoundly *uncritical* literary formation' (2006: 261, emphasis in the original). As we will see, most problems in Fox's narrative are not a result of an 'uncritical' writer but rather of a writer who uses an 'uncritical literary formation'.

Although Fox's journey is on dry land, his whole narrative is structured by what Fox sees as the inextricable link of the sea to the land. Fox seems to utilise what Margaret Cohen has called 'terraqueous geographies' (2010: 658) as existential metaphors for his privileged white self's 'sea voyage' in a seemingly uncertain and perilous democratic South Africa. Fox seems to suggest that the identity crises that he experiences in post-1994 are both racialised and gendered, stemming from his peculiar status as a male, privileged white South African. In reading *The Marginal Safari* we confront what Hans Blumenberg calls the use of the sea as a paradigm of a metaphor for existence. Blumenberg observes: 'Humans live their lives and build their institutions on dry land. Nevertheless, they seek to grasp the movement of their existence above all through a metaphoric of the perilous sea voyage' (1997:7). Fox's book is propelled, both consciously and unconsciously, by what Blumenberg calls the two prior assumptions that determine the burden of meaning carried by 'the metaphoric of seafaring and shipwreck: first, the sea as a naturally given boundary of the realm of human activities, second, its demonization as the sphere of the unreckonable and lawless, in which it is difficult to find one's bearing' (1997:8). *The Marginal Safari* employs the sea and seafaring iconography to understand

how Fox as a privileged white South African man fits or relates to the perceived fluidity of post-1994 South African national aspirations. Among other things, in grappling with the seemingly unstable self and its place in the evolving nation, Fox's nautical repertoire includes voyaging the open seas, shipwrecks, salvaging, lighthouses, surfing, and concerns about shoreline ecology.

Fox views the coastline as embodying a hybridity and transnationalism that needs to be celebrated when he writes that his 'journey was along that confusing strip where South Africa surrendered to the biological Other and became ocean' (2010:27). Although Fox's book is a travelogue it appropriates literal travel into a metaphor for mobility in order to suggest 'the particular ways in which knowledge of a self, society, and nation was, and is, within [South African] culture, to be understood and obtained' (Grewal 1996: 4). It is the coastline more than the borderline which preoccupies Fox's meditation of his relationship with the past, present and future South Africa. He writes: 'Explorers, hunters, map-makers and missionaries, all headed east, more or less following the coastline' (2010:48). This is a fact acknowledged by Pratt who reports that from 'the beginning of their presence, Europeans in the Cape mounted expeditions to explore the interior' (2010:40). Fox is conscious and uncomfortable with the fact that his narrative seem to rehearse the imperial actions and travelogues of European explorers of bygone eras which are now politically incorrect in the evolving multiracial and democratic South Africa. He therefore tries to dissociate himself from such 'imperial eyes'. As he embarks on his journey in what he views as the still unfolding political and social South African landscape of 2004, Fox evidently wants to align himself to various social groups which may allow his project to be in tune with popular aspirations. That is why he writes that his 'journey also traced the routes of castaways and renegades, slaves and desperados who hugged the shore in search of rescue or freedom' (2010:49). But Fox also wants to be viewed as a cosmopolitan figure hence his identification with the trekboers who fled the Cape 'trying to break the shackles of the colony and find a life beyond the pale' (2010:49). By aligning his eastward journey with these mottled narratives and diverse group, Fox signals a confused relationship with what he calls his 'fatherland, my father's land' (2010:28). But this is a confusion that also purportedly afflicts the post-1994 South African nation as a whole.

Fox is fascinated by maritime history, the shoreline and borderline, assuming that a lot of South Africa's past, present and possibly the future can be better understood from this vantage point. He writes: 'I'll run my tongue along its edge, testing it, probing its crevices. I'll lasso the land, encircle it, kraal it' (2010:56). In embarking on his journey, Fox says that his intention was 'to stick close to the coastline or borderline', 'skimming' the edge 'hoping to meet as many people as possible; taking South Africa's pulse, getting inside its head' (2010:13). In the context in which Fox uses it, the phrase 'South Africa's pulse' suggests not just the constant throbbing of the arteries as blood is sent through them, but also captures the regularity of the sea waves seen from the vantage point of the shore. Fox imagines that the shoreline allows him to stay on the edge, or outside while getting into the centre or inside of things, as it were. His intention is to 'sing the song of marginals, those who aren't embraced by it, the refugees, migrants, outlaws, non-conformist, buitelanders' (2010:56). This allows him to be both spectator and participant in the evolving South Africa which, in Fox's view, was and is being wrought both on the coastline and borderline. Blumenberg points out that there is some pleasure associated with watching the perilous events at sea while standing on the shoreline: '[T]he pleasantness that is said to characterize this sight is not a result of seeing someone suffer but of enjoying the safety of one's standpoint' (1997:26). As we will see, for Fox being on the shoreline and borderline allows him to be a spectator as he is not simply safe from the dangers of the sea but those of the vast inland. His spectatorship derives from his recognition that he is a white South African who has to simultaneously embrace his privilege and also bear witness to conditions of extreme poverty that still afflict a huge segment of his fellow South Africans. This suggests that Fox's position on the figurative shoreline and borderline of largely apartheid facilitated material disadvantage merely offers relative safety because he is implicated and affected by events both at sea and on land. In this regard his position as a spectator is perilous and impure. He is a participant-spectator.

Fox's thinking is clearly structured by the actor-spectator and sea-shore duality. This, in turn, becomes a metaphor for his besieged white self in contemporary South Africa's politics, a politics which was partly wrought by Europe's 15th and 16th century seafaring explorations leading to the first landing of the Dutch on South Africa's shores and their subsequent inland

trek. For example, as he drives from Cape Town Central Business District onto Settlers Way, the N2, which he would follow ‘hugging the east coast as far as Mozambique’ he mentions that this ‘route symbolises the first steps of the Dutch advance more than three centuries ago’ (2010:14). The name Settlers Way is of course commemorative of the settling of the early white colonialists near the South African shores of modern day Cape Town. Since these settlers came via the sea, the name itself is loaded with metaphors of the sea. The unsettledness of the Europeans was a direct result of being on the turbulent seas which denied them any sense of stability despite the fact that their embarkation seemingly signified Europe’s victory over the seas. Iain Chambers argues that ‘the sea: its liquidity, its seemingly anonymous materiality, resonates with a postrepresentational understanding, an anchorless image loaded with time’ (2010:679). It was only on dry land that the seafaring Europeans thought that they had escaped the perilous instability of the sea. But the Settlers Way stands as an ambivalent figure of stability and the hazards of dry land as well. This paradox is dramatised by the existence of another alternate route to the interior, Voortrekker Road, roughly parallel to Settlers Way. In this sense, these routes simultaneously mark rootedness and rootlessness. The equation of rootedness to stagnation was a dominant and important way of conceptualising human progress during the 18th and 19th century Europe. Blumenberg writes that ‘it would be one of the fundamental ideas of the Enlightenment that shipwreck is the price that must be paid in order to avoid that complete calming of the sea winds that would make all worldly commerce impossible ... pure reason would mean the absence of winds and the motionless of human beings who possess complete presence of mind’ (1997:29). By embarking on his adventure of circumnavigating South Africa, Fox seems to be operating within this Enlightenment paradigm of existence which according to Margaret Cohen views man as *Homo viator* or ‘man the traveller’ (2010:661).

In Fox’s narrative, the rootedness/rootlessness ambivalence of existence is captured by his feeling at home in Cape Town living beside a lighthouse, yet always wanting to be on the road. James Clifford helps us to make sense of Fox’s seemingly paradoxical situation. He observes: ‘“Home” is a crucial category within European travel because it is the space of return and of consolidation of the Self enabled by the encounter with the “Other”’ (1989:178). Fox writes: ‘I left my apartment beside the lighthouse ...

[r]estless, anxious about an uneventful slide into my late thirties, hungry for adventure – or colourful change at least – I have been craving for the road ... Cape Town, for me, has grown predictable. I, too, have grown predictable' (2010:13). It is interesting that the lighthouse did not warn seafarers of the dangers of the treacherous open seas but rather those of coming too close to the dry land. As long as the ship remained voyaging in the open seas it would not run the risk of running aground in shallow waters or being tossed against menacing cliffs. Similarly, Fox's restlessness paradoxically derives from his rootedness. It is movement, embarking on an adventurous journey that he assumes will give him rest. Fox's narrative indicates that although driving on stable land, his journey is haunted by land's connectedness to the unstable sea. But there is yet another metaphorical linkage. Fox's narrative suggests that this sea-land binary is not merely an external phenomenon but it is also an internal state of existence. Tellingly, Fox calls himself a 'nautical type' (2010:78).

Fox's restlessness and his anxiety about living an uneventful existence does not only lead him to his circumnavigation of South Africa but also suggests that he is already embarked. Blumenberg points out that the 'metaphorics of embarkation includes the suggestion that living means already being on high seas, where there is no outcome other than being saved or going down, and no possibility of abstention' (1997:19). That Fox imagines himself to be in the metaphoric high seas is suggested by his avoidance of familiar places in his journey. For example, about Gansbaai where he had spent many holidays with his parents and where some of his relatives still lived, he writes: 'This place was too full of family, too claustrophobic. I needed to trace my own border lines, make my own plot, strike further east' (2010:17). This notion of comparing or contrasting himself with pioneer explorers of earlier centuries attains the level of a motif in Fox's narrative. He writes: 'Unlike many of my predecessors, who traversed an uncharted land, often making discoveries for science, mine was a circumnavigation that would claim no firsts, no discoveries, no acts of bravery' (2010:49). The term 'circumnavigation' is important here since it does not only refer to Fox's journey around South Africa but is also specifically a nautical term which means to sail completely around.

In 1988, as part of his national service, Fox had been a crew member on board a replica caravel, 're-enacting the fifteenth-century voyage of

Bartolomeu Dias from Lisbon to Mossel Bay' (2010:45)¹. During this coastal trip around South Africa, Fox visits the Mossel Bay maritime museum that commemorates Dias and houses the caravel of their 1988 voyage. Upon seeing the caravel he reports that it took his breath away seeing the vessel up close again. He writes: 'My feelings were conflicted' (2010:46). Interestingly, he is not conflicted because of having participated in a replay of events that do not quite have a narrative space in the post-1994 South Africa, but because on one hand he is 'flooded with happy memories', and on the other hand he mourns the fact that the caravel is 'high and dry, out of her element' (2010:46). It would appear that Fox's whiteness in the post-apartheid South Africa makes him feel out of his element, thus occupying a space very similar to the replica of Bartolomeu Dias' caravel which seems to be out of its element on high and dry land. This is made clear in Fox's subsequent words when he writes: 'Mine was simply a record of an evolving relationship with the land, noting its gifts and perplexities' (2010:49). The irony is that in the new South Africa, Fox is unsettled by what he perceives to be stagnation within an unstimulating environment. Like the replica of Dias' caravel, Fox seems to feel that his white self is 'out of its element'. His journey is therefore a search for a coherent narrative that defines the place and role of a privileged white male South African in post-1994. It is a quest for a new identity. For example, towards the end of his journey Fox imagines himself as having been transformed into the land itself. He writes: 'I am the land My sturdy frame is the end and beginning of Africa. I am contained,

¹ Caravels were much used by the Portuguese for the oceanic exploration voyages during the 15th and 16th centuries during the so-called age of discovery. Commanding a fleet of three caravels, the Portuguese sailor Bartolomeu Dias is reckoned to be the first European to round the tip of Southern Africa in 1488. However, as a result of a threat of mutiny among his crew he had to turn back for Portugal before reaching India. Ironically, Bartolomeu was to perish in the stormy seas in the year 1500 on another expedition to India (See Malcom Turner's *Shipwrecks and Salvage in South Africa* (1987: 12-15). Fox's disclaimer that his circumnavigation would not achieve much is undercut by the fact that by invoking the Bartolomeu legend, he clearly intends to gain some cultural capital for his narrative by juxtaposing his own journey with these 'great journeys of discovery'.

happy. I am South. I could ask for no better home' (2010:247). Kristi Siegel warns us that '[c]onstructing identity ... is also a means of establishing authority' (2002:3). Siegel's observations suggest that Fox's claim to innocence by saying that his journey would simply allow him to note South Africa's gifts and perplexities devoid of any claim to power is an unreflexive statement.

Fox's narrative suggests that his own entanglement and identification with quasi-European colonisers runs deeper than the colour of his skin. As a crew member on board a replica caravel, re-enacting the fifteenth-century voyage of Bartolomeu Dias from Lisbon to Mossel Bay, Fox was unknowingly taking the role of a participant-spectator to events that had a significant bearing to the founding of modern South Africa. There is no indication that Fox had any qualms about being part of this voyage then. Similarly, now as he re-boards the caravel that sits in the maritime Museum, he also does not seem to think seriously about the dissonance caused by the European narrative of great discoveries in the contemporary South Africa he is circumnavigating. Instead, Fox is full of nostalgia when he recalls the hero's welcome his crew received upon successfully completing its voyage. He writes about how they chanted '*O mar, o mar, o mar*', invoking the romance of the sea as [they] rounded St Blaize at the end of [their] voyage, intoxicated by the thrill of homecoming, parents and friends waiting on the beach, and [their] own self importance' (2010:48). Fox mentions that when Bartolomeu stepped ashore he was not aware that 'he had rounded the southern tip of Africa and opened the Indian Ocean to European exploitation' (2010:46). Although Fox may not have known it as a youth taking part in the replay of Bartolomeu's expedition, now, sixteen years later, and ten years after the demise of apartheid rule, he is forced to rethink Dias' expedition and cast it in a way that reflects his evolving relationship with the new South Africa. He observes that not only did Dias take fresh water, barter for provisions but he also skirmished with locals. By so doing, Dias 'forged a link between Europe and what would one day be South Africa' (2010:46). R. Melanie Hunter argues that 'when one is considering the subject of travel and travel writing, one must also consider the matter of perspective, location, of circumstance, of privilege' (2002: 30). Although Fox seems to be conscious of the fact that his expedition is enabled by being privileged, he

seems unaware or chooses not to emphasise how the Dias centenary voyage is mirrored in his one-man's journey around South Africa.

Another issue with Fox's journeying along South Africa's coast is that it does not only allow him to enthuse about what he considers to be the delicate littoral ecology but he seems to unquestioningly buy into conservation projects which are characterised by patronising and essentialist ideologies. For example, driving along the R44 after Gordon's Bay, Fox writes about the coastline in passionate terms saying it is 'green and wild and beautiful' (2010:16). He writes: 'On the left were towering cliffs, the fynbos was green and I rolled the window to let in the fragrance. Far below, waves crashed against granite boulders, their booming sound reaching me moments after each detonation' (2010:16). There are many moments like these where Fox treats his journey as an apolitical 'noting [of the land's] gifts and perplexities'. Fox's strong concerns regarding the threat to littoral ecosystem and the delicate flora of Namaqualand which is threatened by mining ventures is itself a political position. His concerns for the coastline ecology are articulated through Henki le Roux and Maarten Groos, residents of Baartskeerdersbos, who are passionate about the Agulhas Biodiversity Initiative they are involved in seeking to protect their environment. Groos speaks of 'the need for a combination of conservation, empowerment and commercial use of the land' (2010:24) and Henki riles 'against the kind of coastal development that wiped out fynbos' (2010:27). About mining in Namaqualand, he writes: 'Certainly, an ecological hell. You couldn't help feeling the region's flora was worth infinitely more than the chips of glorified quartz it was being sacrificed for' (2010:271). While the wanton destruction of the environment has become a global concern, Fox shares an overly judgemental attitude with some of his characters such as Henki. This tends to position Fox as an innocent observer to the environmental problems that he so meticulously chronicles.

When Fox politicises his descriptions of what he sees, he tends to ascribe unexamined positivism to what he considers to be hybridised and creolised spaces of the coastline and the borderline. Fox views especially the coastline as a fertile metaphorical space for the symbiotic integration of multiple races envisioned by the evolving post-apartheid political process. He observes that shorelines are 'permeable zones where inter-tidal critters, animals, plants and birds of both realms reside' (2010: 27). When it comes to

the human species Fox suggests that this permeability and cosmopolitan nature of South African shoreline was dramatised by victims of some early shipwrecks. About South Africa's east coast, he writes: 'I had found throughout my journey so far, the coastline here is rich in shipwrecks tales. Thousands of castaways – Portuguese, English, Dutch, Indian – have left their mark and their blood among the Xhosa clans' (2010:99). Implying that the post-1994 project of racial integration is possible, Fox cites the example of some shipwrecked white women on the Eastern Cape shoreline and eventually lived all their lives as Xhosa *gogos*.

The Marginal Safari is generally characterised by ecological romanticisations. For example, Fox's concern for environment is evident when he condemns the engineers of the N2, the national road which starts in Cape Town and more or less sticks to the coastline all the way to Durban and finally into Johannesburg, for allowing the clearing of 'a wide swathe of forest' before it. He writes: 'Engineers love the ruler line, forgetting that life is all about winding byways' (2010:55). This is something that clearly preoccupied and disturbed Fox as he drove many hours on the country's roads during his trip. In fact, the front cover of his book is dominated by presumably a picture of the N2 which stretches in a straight line for as far as the eye can see, to demonstrate what he calls 'the ruler' mentality when it comes to road making. By contrast, Fox pours unreserved praise to Thomas Bain, the engineer credited with designing of the R102. He calls him 'South Africa's great nineteenth-century road maker at the top of his game' (2010:55). About the road itself, Fox writes: 'The R102 was how a road should look, a sympathetic meander, two lanes humbled by trees, twisting to reveal a new delight at each bend, never allowing the car to become a projectile. Pioneer-like and intimate, the R102 was disturbed by crumbling shale and fallen trees, the earth's small assertions' (2010:55). Fox's love for nature and his concern for ecological issues are prominent in the above words. But his condemnation of everything that is contemporary and his praise for all that is quaint and colonial is also evident.

To his credit though, Fox acknowledges that he is a privileged spectator in the safety and comfort of his 4x4 vehicle which is fitted with all modern conveniences of travel. That is why he is delighted by 'the range of hues, the scents, the diversity' that he sees and smells all around him. That is why he is content with not seeing 'more than a few metres into the mesh of

leaves and bark on either side [of the road]' (2010:55). He ecstatically declares that this 'was how the N2 should look' (2010:55). Debbie Lisle suggests that travel writing cannot protest innocence since 'the act of writing about travel *itself* engenders contemporary power formations that are as unequal, unjust and exploitative as those forged during the Empire' (2006: 10, e.i.o.). In the above descriptions, Fox seems deaf to the clamour of thousands of less privileged travellers who get packed in taxis on Friday evenings bound for their Eastern Cape destinations and want this ruler line road so as to arrive quickly since they neither have a view nor comfort to enjoy nature's panoramic beauty. For them travelling is a means to an end and not an end in itself as is the case with Fox.

The picture of privileged South Africans as comfortable bystanders or amused sightseers not seriously disturbed by the exigencies of a country afflicted by economic and social inequalities is fore-grounded by Fox's narrative. For example, as he drives towards the town of Mthatha he is ecstatic about each hilltop which 'wore a cluster of rondavels like a crown' (2010:82). He calls these circular structures 'delightful architecture ... functional and elegant, timeless even' (2010:82). Highlighting his role as a non-involved watcher, he writes: 'Driving up coast as a child, I used to long for the first rondavel sighting' (2010:82). Judging from the tone of his narrative, it would appear that this anthropological eye that Fox had as a child has etched itself deeper than he is aware of. While engaging in some self-reflection on whether the replacement of thatch with corrugated iron can be seen as the litmus test for change, 'measuring the march of progress' (2010:82), Fox seems to largely bemoan what he sees as the gradual disappearance of the rondavel. For him, this 'process seemed to signify a break with a former unity with the land, symbolised by the sphere' (2010:82). When he finally catches sight of the township of Cuba comprised of 'rows of ugly apartment blocks and thousands of multicoloured, matchbox houses in neat lines' (2010:82) he is flabbergasted. He exclaims: 'If this was what replaced the rondavel village when rural congealed to urbanity, then cry the beloved countryside' (2010:83). Fox considers Mthatha and its Cuba Township to be an anomaly in an otherwise successful story of South Africa's transition to democratic rule. He writes: 'Mthatha seemed like a vision of the urban Africa we may have inherited had 1994 not been such a successful transition' (2010:83).

While Fox clearly attempts to identify with the black urban poor and what he perceives as the ‘unity with the land’ of the rondavel dwellers, he does so without establishing their views and feelings about their matchbox homes. Just as the rural rondavels are a source of anthropological fascination, the urban poverty that is exemplified by the Cuba township RDP houses is posited as the evidence of the failure of post-apartheid government to create attractive and comfortable urban dwellings. Unfortunately, Fox seems distant from the practical and feasible in favour of an opaque idealism and indefinable architectural aesthetic. Fox does not apply the same scrupulous standards of architectural aesthetic when it comes to those urban spaces that he identifies with. For example, despite acknowledging that Jeffreys Bay is ‘a bit of hotchpotch dorp’ he describes it as having ‘a special energy’, ‘young, international and edgy, like a university town’ (2010:57). He says that the youth came to Jeffreys Bay to study only one thing: ‘the perfect wave’ (2010:57) and as a surfer himself he admits that is why he himself had gone there. Similarly, one cannot miss the sense of emotional attachment in the way Fox describes the coastline view near De Hoop Nature Reserve. He writes of ‘windswept dunes, limestone cliffs, flowering fynbos, pale green shallows lined with shipwrecks and whales’, and exclaims: ‘It’s sights like these that always draw me back to the southern Cape’ (2010:38).

Fox’s claim that his narrative was to be a song for ‘land and its people’ (2010:56) is clearly skewed towards the land and is against what he sees as the new government’s emphasis ‘almost entirely on tourism, not preservation’ (2010:39). Towards the end of the narrative he writes: ‘The horror of the new was everywhere, usually masked behind the guise of progress, or creating job opportunities, or development’ (2010:307). He is especially at complete loss for words² when it comes to spaces inhabited by

² In this regard, Fox’s book comes very close to John Barrow’s *Travels into the Interior of Southern Africa in the Years 1797 and 1798* (1801) a travelogue that narrates a sequence of sights or settings and ‘seems to do everything possible to minimize the human presence’ (Pratt 2008: 58). Other critics have argued that travelogues have not always played a negative role, e.g. Behdad (1994) argues that the late 19th century travelogues were important in eroding some of the most repugnant stereotypes that propelled colonialism.

the poor and underprivileged. For example, at Cove Rock near East London, Fox missed the opportunity of talking to a ‘couple of Xhosa women’ when one of them approached him miming ‘sucking a lolly’ (2010:74). Fox is puzzled for a moment before he understands that they are prostitutes. He then ‘brusquely’ declines talking to her as if she were a leper. Are these women not part of the ‘colours, tastes [and] textures’ of his ‘father’s land, this [his] land’ (2010:56) which he set out to sing?

As we have seen, there is a marked contrast between Fox’s description of natural spaces, usually devoid of human beings, and the spaces of poverty and corruption such as Mthatha’s Cuba township, the Pafuri Mozambican border crossing and the Musina-Beitbridge border post. Fox fails to interrogate the epistemological ‘assumptions about power, culture and difference’ (Lisle 2006: 10) when it comes to issues relating to manning borders and border crossings. For example about Pafuri border post he writes: ‘In contrast to the smart South African post, the Mozambican side was rundown. No-one wanted to see my passport, let alone stamp it A guard was asleep in a sentry box, three others sat around a fire cooking a meal’ (2010:175). The rundown Mozambican side of the border is presented as a threatening space, a vision of Africa that South Africans ‘may well have inherited had 1994 not been such a successful transition’ (2010:83). The ease with which Fox crosses into Mozambique is simply symptomatic of the carelessness and corrupt tendencies that grips everything to the north of South Africa. Fox never stops to consider whether what he calls ‘a simple official border crossing in [his] life’ (2010:175) is not represented from the point of view of a recognisably privileged traveller.

Near Beitbridge we are told that driving ‘was like squeezing toothpaste along a razor blade’ because trucks ‘with red number plates spilled out of Zimbabwe, crabbing along a patchy piece of N1 tar’ (2010:188). This is a place where South African soldiers stand guard with their R4 rifles expecting ‘an invasion of refugees’ (2010:188). The refugees who are said to be coming ‘not only from Zimbabwe [but] from all over Africa’ are merely talked about in phantom-like terms. According to Pratt, the dramas of death and despair of migrant workers and refugees flocking into the so-called developed economies which Fox’s narrative seems to hint at here, ‘are not just an expression of anti-migrant paranoia’ but they may also serve to ‘remind those inside how lucky they are, and how threatened

[they are]’ (2008:241). Pursuing his tone of depicting everything to the north of South African border as threatening, the bridge across the Limpopo river that links Zimbabwe and South Africa is described as looking ‘like something out of Second World War movie needing to be blown up’ (2010:189). What began as a ‘song of marginals ... the refugees [and] migrants’ (2010:56) turns out to be a reinforcement of stereotypes.

Fox depicts his journey as participating in the opening up of the emerging South Africa to other privileged white people who, like him, carry ‘doubt and whiteness’ (2010:57), and are sceptical about displaying fervent patriotism for the emerging inclusive society. For example he relates the story of Willie Labuschagne, a white South African who gives up his prospering computer business in Gauteng to run horse safaris in Maputaland near Kosi Bay. Fox adopts an almost quixotic tone when he describes what he thinks the Labuschagnes represent. He writes: ‘An Afrikaner arrives with wife and child in a latter-day wagon, negotiates grazing rights from a chief, settles in, but there the story changes: he integrates. What an appropriate antidote to the history of exploitation and land grabbing’ (2010:121). Pursuing this exuberant mood, Fox writes: ‘Only if there were more people like Willie, Isobel, and their white Zulu son’ (121). According to Fox, the Labuschagnes’ willingness to integrate into the local community is apparent from the fact that their little son plays freely with the local black children and speaks ‘fluent Zulu’ (2010:117), and in Willie’s passion about the conservation of the natural flora and fauna of Maputaland.

However, they may be problems with the kind of future South Africa that the Labuschagnes represent. Like Fox’s circumnavigation journey which carefully avoids the heart of the country, but rather prefers to take its pulse from the margin, the Labuschagnes seem to be retreating from what they perceive to be the perils of the post-1994 South African city. When describing their reasons for leaving, Willie positions himself as a spectator standing on the safety of the shore, gleefully watching the sinking ship of the post-1994 South African chaotic urbanisation. He confides to Fox: ‘Neither of us wanted to stay in the city. People going at it like ants I mean, even the nice suburbs all look the same. New townhouse developments, the latest cars. Like a rich squatter camp’ (2010:117). Fox’s narrative does not make it clear how retreating into rural South Africa will solve this process of rapid urbanisation. Furthermore, Willie’s relationship with Maputaland is very

patronising. He views it as a 'piece of wilderness' that he and his wife have gradually been taming. He tells Fox that when they first settled in the area it was 'almost inaccessible ... they were hardly any tracks and river crossing saw water coming perilously over the bonnet' (2010:118). But since their arrival, 'a bridge [has] been built and things [are] changing fast' (2010:118). Nevertheless this opening up of the 'wilderness' that Willie and his wife have contributed towards, worries them. Willie says: 'We're hanging onto paradise here. Children are still not used to cars and white people' (2010:118). When one considers that the place suffers from lack of basic services such as a well-equipped school and trained teachers, one starts to wonder about this 'paradise', as viewed through Willie's and Fox's eyes. Although Willie declares that they 'are free of crime' in Maputaland, there are other dangers lurking in the shadows which Willie chooses to ignore. For example, Fox meets a woman who is leading a group of AIDS researchers in the area. The woman declares that the AIDS tests that they are carrying out at schools indicate that in 'five years, there won't be any teachers', all would have been wiped out by AIDS.

Another fault line with Willie's paradise which Fox is uncritical of, is the fact that none of the black locals are interviewed about how they feel about Maputaland. Instead, he completely relies on the views and feelings of Willie and his wife; two individuals who are still relatively new in this community. Similarly, about the AIDS scourge he simply relies on what he considers to be the expert information of the researcher and makes no effort to talk to the local people about the problem. Even Fox's acknowledgement that the integration that he thinks the Labuschagnes represent is not an easy project is also problematic. The idea of a white family 'merging' with the 'native' culture has condescending residues of imperial discourse. This idea of merging with black South Africans is metaphorically dramatised by Fox's completely losing his sense of direction when he takes a walk after supper around the cottage where he lodges for the night at Kosi Bay. Instead of being fearful or trying to fight his loss of orientation, he embraces it. He writes: 'I stand contentedly inside the African blackness, comfortable in my disorientation' (2010:123). This seems to sum up Fox's philosophy of what he calls his evolving relationship with the land. Of course, Fox is South African and not a visitor from Europe. However, the narrative positions him, and other privileged South Africans that he encounters in his journey as

being outside the mainstream South African culture. Although Fox clearly sees his travelogue as being outside colonial and apartheid discourse, the narrative inscribes Fox as a metropolitan figure who peripherises 'others within representational practices marked by inequalities' (Grewal 1996:1). Fox positions his journey as an attempt to merge with the new South Africa and be more part of the land, but a careful reading of the narrative shows that this remains a fraught ambition.

Citing Whitman's 'Song of Myself' where the poet patriotically surrenders himself over to the United States of America, by singing, 'My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil, this air', Fox says his own patriotism to the new South Africa is circumspect and faltering. He says that he is not entirely of Whitman's disposition. At the symbolic level his cautious patriotism is dramatised by his borderline journey around the country. He only wants to be part of the country as a spectator. This is ironic when we consider that Fox claims that his circumnavigation is inspired by Chatwin's *Songlines* (1987) where the aboriginals are described as 'singing up the land' 'as they travel, chanting about topographical features as a form of oral mapmaking, navigating vast distances through song' (2010: 56). Unlike in Fox's case, it is never a question of singing 'the perimeter' or beating the 'drum along the boundary line' in order to affirm one's wavering notions of belonging (2010:56). For the aboriginals, it is less a question of patriotism than a way of being, a never contested and incontestable claim to the land. It is a travelling born out of necessity, a quest for existence and not for sightseeing or ephemeral enjoyments of the land's endowments.

My essay has argued that Fox presents his travelogue as one man's search for identity along post-apartheid South Africa's margins, that is, the shoreline and the borderline and that the narrative also rehearses the fluidity of what Fox sees as the national project for identities emerging in the post-apartheid environment. To use Margaret Cohen's words, Fox tries to depict the South African shoreline and borderline 'as high-risk yet potentially productive spaces at the edge of the dynamic present, where knowledge is expanding but incomplete' (2010:660). Using a similar essentialist and celebratory language as that of colonial explorers, Fox hopes that by travelling on the edges he will discover 'truths' through noting South Africa's 'gifts and perplexities' (2010:49). Largely positioning himself as an uninvolved spectator rather than an active participant, Fox presents this as a

significant undertaking, especially in the first decade of South Africa's political transition to black rule since a significant population of white South Africans was fleeing to continents considered to be less precarious. However, Fox is aware that his circumnavigation of South Africa is enabled by what may be perceived as white privilege, and this complicates his relationship with what he calls his 'fatherland or father's land' since his project places him alongside great European explorers who opened up South Africa for trade and eventually for colonisation. Although the journey allows Fox to reflect on the role of earlier European explorers, the narrative also problematically places him alongside this fraught imperial genre that is itself being interrogated.

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A Small Colony of Persons: Tristan English and the Outside World

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Abstract

Following a visit to Tristan da Cunha, the article comprises of a study of the history and current prevalence of Tristan English.

Keywords: Tristan da Cunha, Tristan da Cunha English, travel article

Tristan da Cunha, a British possession, is an island mountain of volcanic origin in the South Atlantic Ocean. Latitude 37°05'; longitude 12° 16' W. Circular in form. Circumference about 21 miles. Diameter about 7 miles. Height 7 640 feet. Volcano extinct during historic times. Discovered by the Portuguese navigator, admiral Tristo da Cunha, 1506. Occupied by the British, 1816.

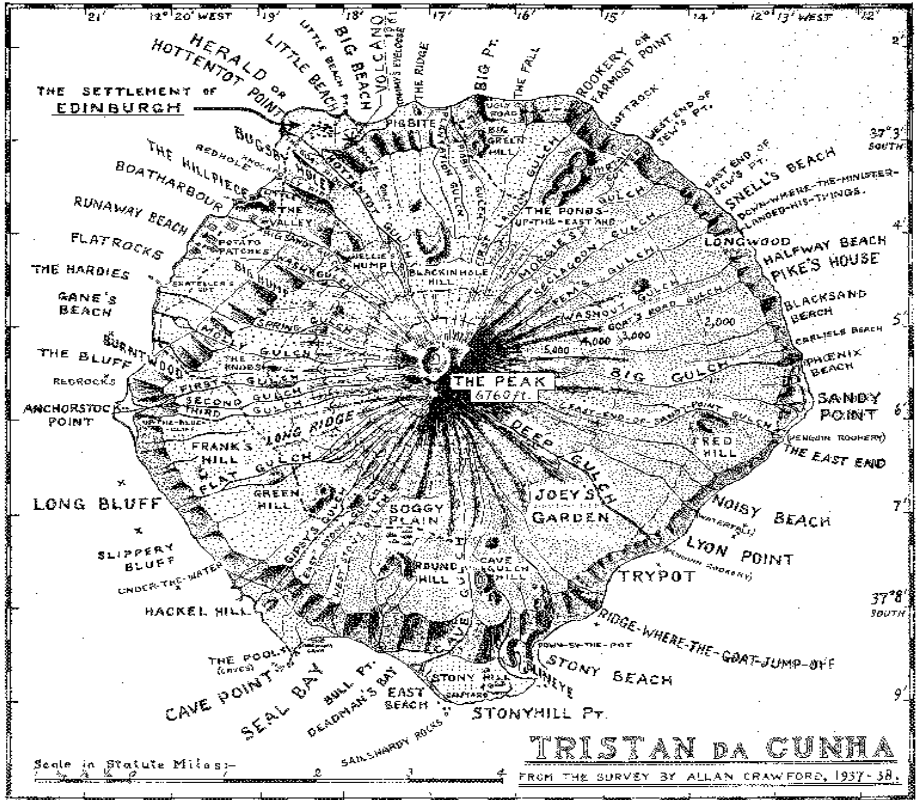
Thus recorded Mrs. K.M. Barrow in 1910, situating the locale of her residency there with her husband and fellow-worker, Rev. Graham Barrow, dispatched by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts. Tristan was an outpost which had had neither clergy nor schoolmarm for all of the previous seventeen years. Before them there had been only two: Rev. William Taylor from 1851 for five years and thereafter Rev. Edwin Dodgson, brother of Lewis Carroll, from 1881.

‘The language spoken is English’, she reported bleakly, ‘but their vocabulary is limited. It was difficult to understand what they said’ (1910:

11). But once she became more acclimatised:

The little girls, most of whom could not write, still wore sun-bonnets called ‘capies’ and, if accused of some irregularity proclaimed the abbreviated ‘I never! I never!’ The people have so intermarried, and there are so many of the same name, that it is difficult to distinguish one person from another.

Yet soon she settled into using their own terms, like ‘stoep’ for veranda, and even ‘crayfish’ rather than ‘crawfish’ for the spiny rock lobster which currently provides the island’s export mainstay.



In the initial numbers of Patrick Cullinan’s *The Bloody Horse* (1980).

My wish to visit this ‘remotest inhabited island’, as the tourist brochure has it, dated from seeing a performance of Zinnie Harris’s documentary play of 2000, *Further than the Furthest Thing*. Although portraying the extraordinary so-called Volcano Years (1961-1963), during which the entire population had to be rescued and shipped out to the United Kingdom as the cinder pile upon which they lived became reactive, threatening to bury their very settlement under fresh lava, the play’s strange appeal was in the dialogue, which was written largely in Tristan English. Your speaker of standard English could grasp the twists and turns of faulty grammar, the half poignant, rather mystifying vocabulary, but then be utterly stumped by sequences of language mutually comprehended only by those akin.

When the community’s administrator, Peter Wheeler, wrote an account of his people’s evacuation, he recorded that he would miss their ‘How you is?’ ‘I’s foin’, rather assuming that such language transgressions would be rectified during their enforced stay in the motherland. But as the press of the day made a sensation of, and as Harris’s play depicts, the Tristans were mostly not to be disbanded by the ‘houtside worl’, but rather elected to return as a community to their remote outcrop, maintaining their peculiar speech, broadened but intact.

So it came about that a long generation later, in 2010, during the annual austral spring run of the logistical supply ship, S.A. Agulhas, 1 500 nautical miles over heaving cobalt, I was able to install myself for more than three weeks at a work-station provided by the island’s Tourism Centre and Museum - out of the near Roaring Forties and slashing rains. My trawl through the island’s spick and span archives and library revealed that, despite the fact that Tristan has been abundantly written about, endemic literary production has to date been sparse: there is one much corrected memoir by the island’s only policeman, Conrad Glass, called *Rockhopper Copper*, and the lyrics of a few new songs by the pupils of St Mary’s School.

The first metropolitan literary figure to be drawn to the Tristan story was Jules Verne, with one of his adventure romances translated into English as *The Children of Captain Grant* (in 1868). By 1962 Geoffrey Jenkins could follow with his Cold War mystery, *A Grue of Ice* (also known as *Disappearing Island*), which actually features a Tristan character (called Sailhardy). After the volcano story broke, Hervé Bazin would produce his

Les Bienheureux de la Désolation (1910) rendered in English as *Tristan, a Novel* two years later, while at the same date the Austrian, Erich Wolfgang Skwara, produced *Tristan Island* (in German), again about re-establishing an utopian society there post the apocalypse.

Poetry-wise, apart from some doggerel in various government reports and field guides, there is only Roy Campbell to record, whose lyric about the solitary, defiant isle, ‘Tristan de Cunha’, dates from his *Adamastor* volume of 1930. In the same year J.G. Lockhart produced a fictionalised account called *Blenden Hall* of the party shipwrecked on the neighbouring Inaccessible Island in 1821, based on the real journal of Alexander Greig, kept there before their rescue and written in penguin blood. Likewise Eric Rosenthal (in 1952) devised his *Shelter from the Spray*, derived from the records of the Stoltenhoff brothers, also marooned there and on Nightingale Island in the 1860s. Needless to say, not one of the above authors managed actually to visit their setting, so that none attempt an engagement with the local oral material on the ground.

With a population varying from a few dozen castaways to never more than three hundred, despite several official attempts to have their forbidding territory abandoned, Tristan has since 1938 fallen under St. Helena, 1 200 miles to the north (as does Ascension Island), forming a British Overseas Territory along the Mid-Atlantic Ridge. It is ruled by a governor who lives among the Saints and who, as there is no longer any direct link except by yacht down to the southern archipelago, has yet to visit his dependency. As Ascension in the subtropics has never had a resident population and been open to the touristic public only since 2004, and as St. Helena, although it has twenty times the permanent population of Tristan, has not to date attracted the scrutiny of the sociolinguist intent on annotating brogues, Tristan in its remoteness is the one landfall which has lured the language record-keepers. Its uniquely evolved dialect of Tristan da Cunha English (TDCE), like Pitcairnese, has indeed drawn outsiders – or ‘expatriates’, as they inaccurately call them – for all of the last two centuries: ‘How you is?’ ‘I’s fresh, tank you’. (An echo of ‘Ek is ...’.)

The annual newsletters of the post-war Tristan de Cunha Association contain many apt comments, like the substitute teacher Miss. E. Harvey’s (in May, 1950) on mating rituals among her charges:

The young man goes to the girl's house every evening and sits with the family. If he is not a 'good provider' of 'sop' (soap), 'rop' (rope) and has no 'larning' (learning), he may be warned that he had better not get too fond of the girl, but if the girl likes him and the parents approve, he may take her for a walk on Sunday afternoons before Evensong.

Such is 'coating time' (courting), which is no 'jok' (joke).

In July, 1960, Miss R.M. Downer, the headmistress, contributed:

'Many books well-loved elsewhere hold no attraction, for poetry and literature mean little to those who have never seen trees, heard singing birds or gathered wild flowers'. All her pupils have, she adds, are bluefish eyes with which to play marbles. When in 1957 the current Duke of Edinburgh steered through the baffling waves, avoiding growlers and blinders, not to mention forests of kelp, those marbles intended as a gift to his royal offspring had been eaten by wild cats, since exterminated. Hence also the community's central social venue, the Prince Philip Hall.

An earlier visitor, Douglas Gane in 1884, was the one to sort out the island's foundational mythology, so as to proclaim it as always having been squarely British. According to Gane in *The Empire Review*, the key founder was one William Glass from the Scottish borderlands, who previously had migrated to the newly acquired Cape of Good Hope, rising to be a corporal of artillery. He was dispatched with the garrison under Captain Abraham Josias Cloete in 1816 to occupy Tristan, the plausible and popular reason given being to forestall any derring-do French plan to rescue their emperor-prisoner from St. Helena. Glass disembarked with his eighty-seven drivers, all picked men, skilful in trades, with their cargo of cattle, sheep and poultry. Although fort-building commenced, the first settlement was adjudged to be an unnecessary expense and soon withdrawn. The turning point is that Glass elected to stay on, keeping the flag flying.

If Glass's unnamed troops are further described, they are generically rendered as 'Hottentot', being commemorated as such at the island's deepest gully, 'Hottentot Gulch' – pronounced 'gultch' and indicating an admixture from the New England whalers and sealers of the following decades. By contrast, at St. Helena such a rocky ravine is called a 'gut'. It turns out as well that it was those very independent ex-colonial Americans acting as

privateers during the American War, with their ‘infestation of enemy cruisers capturing homeward-bound East Indiamen’ (Gane p. 16), which Cloete’s regiment had been assigned to ward off. Pillage was to be diverted into profitable trade, longhaulers needing, after all, to call in for fresh water and antiscorbutics, which the growing station was eager to supply.

Equally unstressed by Cane was the provenance of Glass’s consort, given merely as ‘Cape Creole’. On arrival she already had two infants by him, and was to produce eight boys and eight girls in all as the island’s first permanent population. Later researchers have recorded her maiden name - Maria Magdalena Leenders - indicating that her progenitor was probably what is nowadays known as a Boer, with her mother being of non-slave Khoisan origin, converted to Christianity; that is, she was of the same yeomanry class as the members of the Cape Corps, South Africa’s oldest regiment. During their lifetimes they had served under Dutch, then British, overlords in succession, twice. Although the term ‘Hottentot’ has come to be considered offensive, on Tristan the name is still given to various landmarks and fondly remembered. Another souvenir of her compatriots’ occupation, before most of them were drowned on their return, is the nickname given to the distinctive and ubiquitous Tristan albatross, chicks clapping their bills at one from every muddy mound: ‘gony’ they are known as, after Gonna, the name of one of the continental tribes.

But British territory Tristan would have to remain, especially since Robert Gray, the first Anglican bishop of Cape Town, had established it as a missionary outpost of seventy-one souls, incorporated into his diocese (after visiting briefly in 1856). In his pitch to keep Tristan that way, Gane reminded his readers that, although the population, ‘originally solely British, has been refreshed by the admixture of American, Dutch, Italian, Cape and St. Helena blood’ (p. 7), since its annexation Tristan had always been considered ‘to be extremely important strategically to British interests’ (p. 13). But still, Gane conceded, ‘their system of intermarriage, and their reluctance to express themselves adequately, is only the natural result of a cutting off of any small colony of persons’ (p. 11).

The island had been first visited by ‘an artist-traveller’, the tartan-wearing Britisher, Augustus Earle, marooned for eight months during 1824 with his dog, gun, boat cloak and sketchbook. Later he was to become the draughtsman on H.M.S. Beagle, serving with Charles Darwin. Together with

Mrs. Glass as his hostess was now Peggy, a ‘half-caste’ Portuguese from Bombay. According to Earle, she had been trained as a ‘maid’ by one Mrs. Lock, wife of an English commodore in the Bombay Marine. Transported to the island as a ‘good breeder’ for Stephen White, she had the advantage that her numerous offspring, now that abolition was in the planning, would be born out of slavery there, subject to serve limited apprenticeships only. Later a further six female servants were willing to be supplied from St. Helena with the same expectations, reputedly in exchange for sacks of potatoes, one of them being a ‘Negress’, already widowed and with four children in tow, and the others described as mulattos, all trusting to become respectable married wives. Another accidental settler, Thomas Swain, took as his from among them the only one with a recorded identity, Sarah Jacobs, her surname being the same as that of the Hollander deployed there in 1654 from the Cape to draw the first map for the Dutch East India Company (Commander Jan Jacobsz).

As Earle wrote and published (1832:214):

It cannot be expected that their manners or appearance should partake much of elegance and refinement, or their conversation be such as would be tolerated in polite society, but it is altogether a new scene to me, and I take infinite delight in hearing them relate their different adventures in their own seaman’s phraseology.

Glass praised the indigenes under him particularly for their ‘helter-skelter sort of character, their invariably good humour’ and that is how Earle portrayed Glass’s developing crofters’ hamlet in his portfolio.

‘Their women partake of the mulatto caste’ (1877:153), as another visitor in the 1870s persisted in noting (Wyville Thomson on H.M.S. Challenger), which doubtless was to express the opinion that their sometimes tawny, bushy-haired look was as much thanks to heredity as their partiality to imported Sedgwick’s Original Old Brown (sherry) and Cape Hope (white wine).

When the eighteen-year-old Frank Bullen of *The Cruise of the Cachalot* put in at much the same time and was stood a roast beef dinner, he recorded his sturdy host saying: ‘We kaint grow no corn hyar, and we’m clean run out ov flour; hev ter make out on taters ‘s best we kin’ (1898:91).

The dusky wife meanwhile was apparently tongue-tied at the sight of such a 'greeny'.

The British interest was really clinched in 1867 when Queen Victoria's teenage midshipman son on the man-of-war *Galatea*, created the Duke of Edinburgh two years before, was rowed ashore for another slap-up dinner (conversation unrecorded). Hence, however, the settlement acquiring the name of Edinburgh-of-the-Seven-Seas. (The same Prince Alfred in Cape Town had not only inaugurated the breakwater, but left his name in four African locales, Port Alfred, Alfred County, etc.).

When the already quoted Challenger expedition, pioneering hydrographic surveys in the 1870s, allowed their naturalist Henry Moseley to make a landing there, he wrote:

My guide was a small boy, born and bred on the island. He was peculiarly taciturn and, like all the islanders, extremely curt in his language. Like most of the others he showed a strong Yankee twang in the little I got him to say, and he seemed to have considerable difficulty in understanding what I said to him in ordinary English, and often not to be able to understand at all (1892:97).

Yet this future fellow of Exeter College delights in mentioning the Tristans' habit of calling their stands or grasses 'tussacs' or 'tussocks', and that their Jumping Jack rockhopping 'pinnamins' (penguins) wear unruly yellow 'tozzles' instead of 'plumes'. He also deduces that 'albatross' derives from the Spanish 'alcatraz', while 'molly' (for the ubiquitous yellow-nosed variety) is from the European Dutch 'mallemok'

Putting Tristan on the map, as it were, was to continue in 1923 with the first visit in two years of the Simonstown-based cruiser H.M.S. *Dublin*, with the prolific journalist working for *The Cape Argus*, Lawrence G. Green, being on board. With him was an African Films crew, whose Mr. Sara shot the first motion pictures, as Green would record in several travel works published in the 1960s. Alarmingly he mentioned that several parents had wished for their offspring to be filmed, apparently so that they might be adopted out. Although the team stayed only one day and the settlement was on the verge of starvation, Green popularised knowledge of many Tristan features, like their Appling and Ratting Days and their traditional sailing

longboats or dories, one called Vortrekker (sic.), another Darwin's Express. Green enjoyed describing their thatching bees and the picturesque use of placen ames, such as Trypot, Blin'eye (after a feral bullock), Ridge-Where-the-Goat-Jump-Off, Pigbite and Deadman's Bay. But of the latter he missed a few: for example, the Hardies (the offshore columnar stacks) and the Coolers (damp patches or pits), names derived from the South African Dutch 'hardebank' and 'kuil' respectively.

With the Second World War Tristan was at last linked up with the rest of the world as a listening post, thanks to the first radio installations used to alert the Allies of any enemy presence. Drafted there from Simonstown for a year in 1942 came the operator, D.M. Booy, whose *Rock of Exile: A Narrative of Tristan da Cunha* is still the most explicit account. With the other station fellas' in off-hours he established what they called a 'strange classroom':

Most of the girls were content with illiteracy. The biggest obstacle was that the English they were being taught to read and write was so different from the language they spoke, which at its best was vivid and vital. It lent itself to imagery. A person chilled by the cold was 'as blue as dimin'. To someone whose hair had been tousled by the wind a girl might say, 'You' hair is all done root up'. To correct local grammar – [he cites the double and triple negatives, the w for v as in 'willage', the hypercorrect hs as in 'heating, heggs and happles'] - would have been as difficult as it would have been pointless (1957: 103).

One reminder of the signal station is its 'canteen', as the only general dealer and grocery store is still called, where I likewise, out shopping with the daughter of my hosts, was flummoxed by the order for 'flubba' (until I saw the label Sasko Self-raising Flour). We lit on a 'coo' drink (for 'koeldrank' or cold drink) as reward, drinking a toast to the spreading South African influence, which was even extending to Gough Island to the south. There since 1955 its government-leased meteorological facility has provided new names, such as Gonydale and Tafelkop. Then we fell to discussing how the Sunday service's lesson from Isaiah had come to be pronounced 'Hoisioiah'.

Another observer like Booy was Allan Crawford, first there on the Norwegian Scientific Expedition of 1937-1938 as its surveyor. Based early on in the war in Pretoria, in 1941 he produced his *I Went to Tristan*, then returning there in 1943 to edit *The Tristan Times* (price 3 cigarettes or 1d.). With his next three volumes, and together with Jan Brander's *Tristan da Cunha, 1506-1902* of 1940, all that could possibly be revealed about the island fastness had come into print. Indeed, Crawford's Appendix IV of 'Some Tristan Words' (1941: 268), although mostly of British derived names from 'ammunition' (heavy boots) to 'whitecap' (wave) and 'willie' (whirlwind of spray), begins the systematic registering of the people's lexicon.

The first scholar to research the Tristan vocabulary professionally is Daniel Schreier, currently Professor of Linguistics at the University of Zurich and with whom I had the pleasure of travelling back on the S.A. Agulhas. He is the author of *Isolation and Language Change: Contemporary and Sociohistorical Evidence from Tristan da Cunha English* (2003), derived from ethnographic fieldwork first conducted when he stopped on Tristan in 1999. Since then, together with his wife and co-author, Tristan-born Karen Lavarello-Schreier, he has produced the superb, less technical and very accessible *Tristan da Cunha: History, People, Language* which, while plugging the future researcher into all the relevant websites, includes an exhaustive Tristan glossary (2003: 77- 82). In both texts the authors point out that, while by 1851 no other languages were spoken but English by the first generation Tristans, this had picked up certain Creole features from especially the immigrants coming via St. Helena, hence the double modals like 'might could', the multiple negatives and irregular concords ('You know what Tristan rumours is like').

The Schreiers also list many post-war acquisitions from South Africa, entirely owing to the fact that every import on their shelves arrives there from nowhere else: thus 'braai skottle' to mean 'barbecue contraption', on which 'boerewors' (spicy pork sausage) is roasted outdoors; 'lekker' for delicious or even drunk; 'takkies' for plimsolls or running shoes. Much other off-school speech is included, such as the use of 'bioscope' for cinema, until supplanted by the standardising Home influence of BFBS TV, and riding out to the vegetable patches in 'bakkies' (light pick-up trucks).

A predecessor to Schreier to analyse such regular borrowings had been one Roderick Noble, an English professor who visited this research field for a few days off the Earl of Rippon in 1851. He was to become noted back in Cape Town, where he settled, for his editorship especially of the review, *The Cape Monthly Magazine*, in the 1870s. Convinced in those pages that his expanding colony had likewise accumulated a similar, and sufficiently unique wordstock, he proposed that a distinct ‘Cape English’ (CE) be recognised. The wordlist he published shows some overlap with TCDE: there is, for example, ‘kraal’ (from the Portuguese curral, the equivalent of the North American corral), which overtakes sheepfold, and ‘cappie’ (kappie of Cape Dutch), already mentioned, now described as ‘a sun-wind-dust-and-flyscreen all in one’. As Noble noted: ‘It is one of the marks of a living language that it assimilates to itself new and strange words, drawn from many opposite quarters’ (1873:281).

However, there are numerous other examples, hitherto untraced, of other derivatives, particularly from South African Dutch, which for another half century should perhaps not be so loosely labelled as Afrikaans. But in the 1820s it impacted on TCDE in the intermediate form of the emerging CE. Because the conveyors of this speech were primarily domestic women of low status, it is to the kitchen that one should first turn. So we have breadrolls called ‘cakes’ (from ‘koek’) and mutton stew as ‘bradie’ (from ‘bredie’, the Malayo-Portuguese flavoursome term).

Many edible fish types acquire a name from CE: ‘stumpnose’ (from ‘stompneus’, the sea-bream), ‘steambrass’ (from ‘steenbras’), ‘yellowtail’ (translated from ‘geelvis’ for the Cape mackerel) and snoek (the barracuda-like pike) remains snoek. To this day the octopus is called ‘catfish’ (from *zeekat*, which became *seecat* in CE), the term which has persisted among coastal dwellers of the South African mainland, while inland it has come to indicate the freshwater barbel. There is also the colour-changing ‘klipfish’ (‘klipvis’) for the unscaled family of blennies, taken in rockpools. The red and orange striped jacobever is flagged as a ‘soldier’ after the battalion’s uniforms of long before.

The Schreiers list ‘bankatina’ or ‘banky’ for bench, remarking that the contribution of Afrikaans to TCDE is marginal at best, even though today every South African schoolchild in class also sits on a ‘bankie’. To ‘kooibietjie’ is to take a little nap, because ‘*kooigoed*’ once was the label for

'Hottentot bedding', as noted in Oxford's *A Dictionary of South African English on Historical Principles* (1996). The origins of 'okalolie', referring to the men's New Year's Eve dress-up, and 'oukabaadjie' meaning scary folk, are now obscure, although the CE o-/ou- prefix signifies an affectionate ol' (for old) and 'kabaai' was once an Indian term for a banian loose gown, indicating a 'half-caste' wearer, hence bogeyman.

The nursery circle in charge of the women includes the terms 'o' pap' for grandfather (from *oupa*), 'fardi' for father (from *vader*) and 'muddish' for godmother (from *moeder*). Infants who, if they are dusky are called 'piccanin' (from the Portuguese *pequenino*), learn to play games with a 'dolos' or two, that is with sheep's knucklebones as thrown by Xhosa-speaking diviners to read fortunes; nowadays the term has been transferred to the tumble of anchor-shaped concrete castings breaking the 'sarf' (surf) at the harbour arm. Once the New Zealand flax is established as windbreaks, the youths may swat one another with suckies' (from *sak* for pouch or pocket), the seedpods atop long stems: 'You winning me!'

So there, under the orographic cloud mantle, alongside their quiescent upheaval of red tuff and black scoria, running on GMT, lies a community whose hidden story encoded in its unique dialect is as evident of its interlinking history with the Cape of Good Hope, only a week's sailing away, as the imported clumps of pig-lilies (or arums, or callas) which emblazon its byways, alongside its endemic fowl-berries and dorgcatchers tripping their collies. 'You's laffing ...' you say. 'We is ...' they reply, 'but sea's getting bubbly'. Notice our cattle egrets there, migrants all, in the twitty grass.

Back home after my probings I happen to meet up with the broad lady of mixed –race origin who is one of the managers of Cape Town's new Fugard theatre. 'You is back safe!' says she. Immediately we fall into ripe Capey vernacular: all her youth her many male family members were gone for months on end, way out there on the Tristania I, Tristania II, catching up the last of the fish!

But those islanders there, man, they didn' really speak what you call *English*, hey? More like ... klonkietaal, you know ... soos grannie wid her teeth out! Broken English! But you know what? Always they bring back the lekker sweaters, carded themself and spinned, wid all the juicy kreef you can eat to die for, even they have them holding up their flag! Wild Caught Cold

Stephen Gray

Water Lobster Tails, aikona; now it's all Ovenstones, off to Japan for hexport!

An' did you hear what they call a fridge for col' storage? - a cooler, I'm tellin' you! They don' jus know about *chookie* cause they don' have none!

Isn it?

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Witness to the Makeshift Shore: Ecological Practice in *A Littoral Zone*

Julia Martin

Abstract

This essay suggests that Douglas Livingstone's long poem 'A Littoral Zone' (1991), an explicit conversation between his work as an environmental scientist and his work as a poet, makes for a poetic statement that is, in various senses of the word, ecological. The sequence of poems draws extensively on scientific research in the field of bacteriology, is minutely located in 'place', evokes a secular sacramentalism in its representation of ecological interconnectedness, and situates the present moment in the context of deep time. In all, Livingstone's distinctive stance involves a tough, tender negotiation between irony, equanimity, wonder, and a sense of critical environmental urgency. Read twenty years later, his view of the South Coast littoral and of the world in which it is situated, seems prescient.

Keywords: Douglas Livingstone, *A Littoral Zone*, eco-criticism, secular sacramentalism, interconnectedness, deep time.

They named it Danger Beach for the currents, Muizenberg for the old mountain, Kalk Bay for the chalky lime they used to whitewash their houses, and St James for the Catholic Church. Before this recent occupation, for a long time there were caves, fish traps, grinding stones and many animals. Before these things, the basin of sea the explorers called False Bay was land – archaeological divers still find million year old handaxes under the water – and before all that, this neighbourhood was sea again, primal and peopled with ancestors, ceaselessly sounding almost forever.

Now in the morning when the tide is out, whelks walk highways in the sand. Snail roads track across a rock. Sea lettuce swims in a standing wave, and continents of sand take form and flow again. Treading in the wash of shells and civilized debris at the wave's edge, the pale beach sequined with fragments of blue mussels, our feet find their path among tiny branching trees, veins, rivers left behind in the sand by the receding tide. Our words drift in the small wind¹.

Around the time I began rereading Douglas Livingstone's *A Littoral Zone* (1991) to prepare for this paper, screens all over the world were suddenly overtaken with images of a great coastal devastation that swept multitudes of houses, factories, trains, cars, people and fields away like so much flotsam. The tsunami of March 2011 was immediately a catastrophic reminder of the impermanence of this edge we call the shore, the flimsiness of any merely human edifice in the face of really powerful environmental forces, and the tragic folly of civilized heedlessness. The scenes we all watched were spectacular, terrifying, utterly compelling.

Douglas Livingstone's concern is also coastline, that shifting region at the margins of land and sea. But his audience is small, locals mostly, his medium is not international news footage filmed from a helicopter but poetry, things seen from the edge, and the environmental disaster to which he stands witness is quotidian, almost unremarkable. The book is a sequence (ideally read as one long poem, the Author's Notes suggests) written over twenty-five years and published in 1991². In an interview from the same year, Livingstone said that while he started out in life wanting to do medicine, he soon became 'more interested in healing the planet than its prime polluters' (Fazzini 1991: 136), and went on to explain that about thirty years previously he had decided 'to devote [his] few skills to our Mother, the earth, and to making a few poems to entertain, tease, challenge my readers into having some love, some concern, some identification with this beautiful planet' (1991: 140). In *A Littoral Zone*, this orientation makes for an explicit conversation between his work as an environmental scientist and his work as a poet: delighting in the

¹ I would like to thank Michael Cope for his comments and conversations. As always.

² Following Tony Morphet's fine reading of the sequence, I tend to see the book as one long poem.

myriad liveliness of a particular reach of seashore near Durban, and recording the ordinary disaster of industrialised humans' impact on its inhabitants. This devastation over an extended time period is unspectacular, sometimes hardly visible, a case of the sort of environmental destruction that Rob Nixon has called slow violence. That is a kind of violence which, unlike the spectacular devastation wrought by a tsunami, 'occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all' (2011: 2). Struggling to deal with its intractability and pervasiveness, *A Littoral Zone* responds implicitly to one of the key questions Nixon identifies: 'How do we bring home – and bring emotionally to life – threats that take time to wreak their havoc, threats that never materialize in one spectacular, explosive, cinematic scene?' (2011: 14). In this regard, Livingstone's book reflects on a working lifetime of scientific and imaginative practice in a particular location. The result is a poetic statement that is, in various senses of the word, ecological, and now seems prescient³.

To begin with, there is the unique association between this volume and Livingstone's day job. As a bacteriologist, he was engaged from 1964 onwards in the microbial measurement of sea pollution off the coast around Durban. This involved regular collection of water samples, their analysis in

³ Among the critical scholarship dealing with the ecological priorities in *A Littoral Zone*, Duncan Brown's 'Environment and Identity' (originally published in 2002) is a thoughtful reflection on the volume's contribution to the contemporary South African literature of place and belonging. The most detailed and sustained discussion of Livingstone's poetic treatment of ecological issues appears in Mariss Stevens' unpublished MA thesis (2004). Her project is, explicitly, an 'ecocritical examination' of his *oeuvre*, and she devotes three chapters to analysis of this particular collection. In a series of very detailed close readings, she explores both what she calls (citing Livingstone himself) the 'ecological despair' manifested in the poems (125), and the 'tentative thread of hope' that human creativity might appear to offer (171). In a subsequent essay, Etienne Terblanche (2006) takes Livingstone's ecological concerns in the collection more or less as read, and is primarily interested in locating his exploration of liminality with regard to the work of modernists such as T.S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens and e. e. cummings.

the laboratory, and development of his own interpretive model outlined in a PhD thesis on microbial testing. There are clear analogies between this activity – sampling, analysing, writing up – and the discipline of making poems. And at the same time Livingstone said that he would like the two works to be published as companion texts, with the thesis read as the ‘hard core version’ of the poetry (Brown 2006: 105). As this suggests, *A Littoral Zone* takes much of its shape from reflecting on his role as environmental scientist. The ordering of the poems (together imagined as what he calls in the Notes ‘the record of one daylong mythic sampling run’ (1991: 62)) follows the sequence of sampling stations he regularly visited. The language of the poems assumes some familiarity with scientific registers. And he uses the medium of poetry to reflect (critically, ironically, philosophically) on the effectiveness of his practice as an environmentalist. At the same time, the fact of this volume implicitly embodies the contention that there are certain things (concerning the heart, the imagination, the spirit even, soft core things if you like), that hard science cannot say, and that need, for all our sakes, to be said⁴.

The poetry is also ecological in another sense: its locatedness in ‘place’. This emphasis (which Livingstone shares with environmentally informed writers of ‘place-based’ literature elsewhere in the world,

⁴ Regarding the tentative negotiations between ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ registers in environmental discourse during this period, I am reminded of the concluding section of *Beyond the Limits: Global Collapse or a Sustainable Future*, the influential international study of growth and sustainability that was published the following year as a sequel to the ground-breaking Club of Rome Report of 1972. After extensive analysis of computer-generated projections regarding our common future, the authors introduce ‘five other tools we have found helpful’, while noting that these are tools that they are hesitant to discuss ‘because we are not experts in their use and because they require the use of words that do not come easily from the mouths or word-processors of scientists. They are considered too ‘soft’ to be taken seriously in the cynical public arena. They are: visioning, networking, truth-telling, learning, and loving’. The argument that follows proposes that ‘[t]he transition to a sustainable society might be helped by the simple use of words like these more often, with sincerity and without apology, in the information streams of the world’ (Meadows *et al.* 1992: 223 - 224).

particularly those writing at the time) is made explicit in the maps of the coastline around Durban that frame the collection⁵. All of the long poem is somehow concerned with this particular zone of study which the map at the end of the book charts in terms of a series of ‘stations’ (evocative word, the sites of scientific research oddly resonating with Biblical echoes), twenty-six in all. So whatever insights the speaker offers (about evolution, science, love, philosophy, ecology or poetry), these are nearly always precisely located. The poems have names like ‘An Evolutionary Nod to God Station 4’, ‘Cells at Station 11’, ‘Subjectivities at Station 15’. This instance of deliberate situatedness evokes the ecologist’s recognition that one is always seeing or writing from somewhere, that place matters critically. But for the work with which Livingstone is concerned, place, or our apprehension of it, must always be something fluid, mobile. As the speaker tracks a passage from one station to the next, the focal setting of our attention zooms from the geographic, cartographer’s spatial view of the territory into the minute particulars of the shore. Here he meets particular people, particular animals, particular garbage, sand and rock pools, and nested within them all a multitude of living things visible only when relocated to a microscope slide and observed through a powerful lens.

Visiting these places he encounters varieties of environmental pollution, what one poem calls ‘sullage’, and the disheartening work of engaging with it over twenty-five years. The analysis of sea water pollution which is the subject of Livingstone’s thesis (quite literally, the impact of our shit – *E. Coli* is developed as a key indicator in his study) is attended in the

⁵ In North America in particular, the emphasis on ‘place’ and the ‘local’ has been a key element of environmental literature and of the ecocriticism that has arisen to track it. Recently, this emphasis has been criticized for its potential insularity or parochialism (Rob Nixon explores this in *Slow Violence*, especially in the chapter ‘Environmentalism, Postcolonialism and American Studies’, 2011: 233 - 262), and arguments are being made for bringing place-based models into conversation with contemporary understandings of globalization and postcolonialism. See for example Ursula Heise’s discussion of the need for what she calls an eco-cosmopolitan critical project in *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (2008).

poems by a sickened, anguished response to the unremitting pollution of the littoral zone around Durban. Decades before recycling became popular, or the analysis of garbage a key aspect of raising environmental awareness, he reads the contemporary culture by looking at its waste. At Station 1A, he writes ‘the mess on the sand incredible; scraps, vomit and cartons abound’ (12), while at Sunkist, he stoically records paper cups, empty tins, a broken mirror, but summons up the resolution to continue: ‘Among Monday’s debris from Sunday’s crowd, / I try to face the shattered sea uncowed’ (13). In pursuing his scientific research, the speaker inevitably becomes a witness to the cruelty, thoughtlessness, and ignorance that are the symptoms of a heedless civilization out of touch with its environmental basis, bent on sullyng its own nest. His response is complex. He is ironic, sometimes even self-satirical, *and* uncompromisingly devoted to the task in hand. If, in one guise, he is a knight in the service of Mother Gaia (Don Quixote in fact, tilting at windmills much of the time), then this odd quest has become a life’s work:

There’s work ahead: futile
scientifically delivered blows at sullage,
against the republics of ignorance and apathy,
with bust lance, flawed shield,
lamed steed of action; downhill
past Country Club to Blue Lagoon
brown with silt hell-bent for the surf.
Here is my daily bread’s commencement (10).

While the long poem tracks its way through pollution and waste, it is simultaneously an awed witness to the resilient beauty of the biosphere. The speaker recognizes himself as an inextricable participant in this living system, the child of a long lineage that began in the sea, an animal among other animals. In ‘Darwinian Preface’ his fear of death meets the calming recognition of a certain continuity: ‘Perhaps the sea indeed did suckle you’ (7), he suggests, an idea that is developed in a subsequent poem in which ‘vestiges in me / recall a time I once breathed in its sea’ (18). Since Livingstone’s voice is characteristically tough, gritty and ironic, his ecology that of a scientist with a job of work to be done, the tenderness of such statements is particularly evocative. Against the harsh instrumentalism he

repeatedly witnesses in people's attitudes towards other animals, the poems offer similarly an unsentimental kindness that perseveres in seeing such fellow beings as sentient, and strives to heal, to help, to make amends. The old whaling station is long abandoned, but the place is irrevocably 'blood-flecked', he says, haunted with the memory of harpoons and hackers, the tongues of whales stuck out at death, and his own work of sampling continuing doggedly in the midst, 'checking the surf slimy with reject' (36). In another poem he finds a dolphin beached, and tries to help. But he can't do it on his own, and the fishermen turn away when he calls. As he leaves, he sees them moving towards her, 'one drawing a long and rusted bayonet' (55). And in the extraordinary 'Bad Run at King's Rest' he is faced with a logger-head turtle, mutilated first by a propeller-blade and then by trophy-hunters.' Livingstone's response spares his readers little:

It raised its beak to scream or pant,
the exhalations making no sound.
Dumping my bottles on the heaving sand,

I moved – lifelong stand-in for thought –
avoiding the still dangerous beak,
asking pardon, cut the leathery throat.

Rinse off queasily. Circle wide,
back, past that inert, spread-eagled mound.
Call dumbly on gulls, on incoming tides (37).

Equally extraordinary, I think, is the image of the duiker faun in 'A Visitor at Station 21.' While the speaker is engaged in an internal debate about the existence of God, invoking a variety of complex philosophical positions, his senses become aware of the presence of a delicate duiker doe approaching him on the dune. For all our intellectual culture, there are still times when the immediacy of the living world simply breaks through and touches our skin. This is one such moment:

Stubbing the butt, a movement: small hooves
tread delicately, pause for each wave-

break. I suspend mentation in view
of an impending holy event.

She walks, in quick trust, decidedly
up beside me. Her leaf-stained tongue flicks
out, licks salt from my wrist. One rust-fringed
brown eye rolls worriedly at the surf.
These frail seconds halt the debate.
She turns, steps unhurriedly away.

The secular sacramentalism Livingstone develops in such encounters evokes the insight into interconnectedness which is another shaping element of the long poem, and a key concept for any sort of ecological thought or practice. Encounters with the inhabitants of the littoral zone (whether large or microscopic) offer a chance to glimpse that, as he put it in the interview, ‘all life is interconnected and ultimately holy; that we are here, temporarily in a temple of life’ (1991: 142). As an ecologist he recognises that the places and beings that the separate poems address are not discrete entities or selves, but patterns or nodes in a network that links from the particular into everything else. So while it is not his concern to write explicitly about global flows or politics or economics, when you look at it closely as a poet scientist, the strip of coast near Durban is a place that opens out into the whole system. Among the fish, kelp, rubbish and myriad beings that populate the seashore, there is also an old couple with memories of Warsaw, as well as Bach and Beethoven, Todd Matshikiza and Can Themba, Darwin, Hildegard of Bingen, a Nazi aviator with stainless-steel teeth, a harbour that links to Byzantium and Samarkand, and a robust young man hopping on his single leg in the surf (“Landmine” he says with laconic élan’ p. 22).

As this suggests, the representation of spatial interconnections in *A Littoral Zone* inevitably evokes the idea of connectedness across time. In this regard, what holds more fascination for Livingstone than recent history are the marks of what may be called deep time, and our accommodation to it. The present moment links us and other life forms, quite physically, through our cells, to a very ancient ancestry. So over the years, his collection of samples on the Durban coastline provides opportunities to place the present dispensation in relation to the great reaches of the past. At Station 17 the

speaker finds a mass of paintings on a cave wall that evoke a much older and apparently more sustainable inhabitation of this site than what the current custodians of the region are up to: 'The stone sides are crammed: blazed / with swarms of symbiotic man about / the business of getting on with the earth' (44). More astonishing perhaps, is the 400 million year old Coelacanth, witness to a myriad changing forms and shores, whom he addresses as a Patrician, and recognizes as an ancestor:

What awes me – fish from long ago –
is not the muddying of your chaps
when waves clawed 200 metres up
or below today's makeshift shores,
nor your changeless chinless lineage,
but your fathers squirting on eggs
to sire everyone I know (24).

And then there is the dead body in the sea at Station 11, and the water sample he scoops from nearby. Will it include 'a cell from that out there?' he asks, and goes on to wonder about the occupation of our bodies by 'Billion year-old invaders / - the silent mitochondria-' (35). This zoom into the microscopic (which holds at once the traces of deep time) is reminiscent of the position he contentiously took at Poetry 74, a conference on South African English poetry at UCT, where he responded to the emphasis on what he called 'polit-lit' with a biological account of human beings' internal cosmology:

Each of us is a walking universe of completely disparate worlds,
continents and seas, with immense and differing populations, all
organized together into some sort of functioning coherence with the
inherent determination (if we are sane) to preserve life and what is
left of our planet (1976: 143).

Why focus on biology and the biosphere, give science a hearing, as he put it, in the discussion of priorities for poetry? *A Littoral Zone* repeatedly evokes both the long, long reaches of time, and the spatial extension into the whole system. The effect is an implicit suggestion that contemporary humans'

seemingly wilful ignorance of interconnectedness and deep time is a key aspect of our modern delusion and the forms of violence it sanctions. While the speaker avoids collective activism and his pursuits are mostly solitary, in the course of his work as environmental scientist (gathering the data and analytic tools for the assessment of water pollution that activists and decision-makers will need), he simultaneously works with some dedication as a writer to resituate human activity in an ecological network, qualify human hubris, recognize its impact in the slow violence that continues to pollute the earth, and hope for the chance of a fundamentally different sort of engagement.

Or perhaps it's all too late, a fool's errand. In the last poem, Livingstone's ironic critique turns on his own practice, raising a question that holds good for anyone involved in environmental work – whether scientist, writer or activist. Perhaps, he says in the final poem, Gaia does not need her knights. After all, we humans are the ones that are expendable, the 'entropy' that might well be excreted should the current crisis not be averted. The thought is challenging of course, and could well be interpreted as a justification for disengagement, apathy:

A tendency in all that's living is to excrete
its entropy. The planet counterattacks.
Its choice is plan: kill or be killed.
Ours too: symbiosis or death
at the hands of a bright blue cell
- the only living thing in known space.
Perhaps you do not need your knights, Gaia:
in the end, you have to win (61).

So if Gaia doesn't need us, why bother with any of this? Walking on the False Bay shore, thinking of Livingstone and extinction, and how you can sometimes glimpse it here (pollution, interconnectedness, the liveliness of everything changing into everything else) I am reminded of Rachel Carson. Not *Silent Spring* this time - its implacable warning set like the ancient inscription on a tsunami stone before the tide, 'Do not build your houses beyond this point!' – but a less well-known work, another companion text. The words Carson asked to be read at her funeral were from the ending of *The Edge of Sea*, in which her marine biologist's understanding of the

shifting, elusive intertidal zone is presented in a lyrical, reflective voice for a general audience. 'Contemplating the teeming life of the shore,' she writes in the Epilogue, 'we have an uneasy sense of the communication of some universal truth that lies just beyond our grasp' (1998: 250).

Livingstone might not go so far as to make claims for universality, but the details of the makeshift shore off Durban are instructive in a multitude of ways, and tracking this place over twenty-five years, he does meet some intimations. The first line of the long poem begins with death and the fear of it: 'The crab, the clot, the muzzle or the knife: / patiently, the nocturnal terrorisms / stalk' (7). The last poem ends with a cautious affirmation: 'The pennants flutter. The sound of pounding / hooves drums up the trophy: life?' (61). Within this frame, the crazy knight who is both environmental scientist and poet discovers whatever healing there is to be found in the pursuit of his daily work. Of fear and loss in the face of death he says at the beginning 'There is no help for it. Best buckle to' (7) and at the end of the sequence, 'No other course before such wiles ... but to accept the gage and buckle to' (61). Herein lies Livingstone's response to the paradox of environmentalist agency: though in some big picture Gaia may not really *need* our ecological gestures, working to save the sea is what saves him. Us. Working for others is what blesses us, makes us kind. Studying sullage is oddly healing. As he puts it in the penultimate stanza of the sequence, what rescues the speaker from indifference and disengagement is in fact the sea: 'your old ally against psychic apathy, / who saves your soul from atrophy' (61).

But there's more to it yet, I think. After all, whatever assertions you make at the seashore are always provisional, subject to the tides. Twenty years later, we can recognize (as somewhat eco-conscious readers) that Livingstone's project as scientist poet involves considerably more than his own secular redemption. At the time he was sometimes censured for not being sufficiently politicised⁶, and certainly even his most explicitly environmental poems are not about eco-activism or collective eco-political endeavour. Yet what many of the poems in *A Littoral Zone* are about seems to me something crucially instructive and deeply radical: a view and a

⁶ In this context Dirk Klopper, for example, reflects on what he calls Livingstone's steadfast refusal to 'subserve his poetry to the demands of direct political intervention' (1997: 43).

practice that literally goes to the roots, the waters, the cells, the ancient bacteria, and witnesses in their patterns our common life, its joy and impermanence.

How then to shape in words the shifting, liminal, littoral edges of the world, or wake us up to the forms of human violence that work to pollute them? Livingstone's long poem conducts one such experiment, his distinctive stance a tough, tender negotiation between irony, equanimity, wonder, and a sense of critical environmental urgency. As Gary Snyder, another lifelong practitioner of a similar paradox, has put it: 'Knowing that nothing need be done, is where we begin to move from' (1974: 102).

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Estuary: Brian Walter's Swartkops Poems

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Abstract

Estuaries are amongst our most treasured and threatened coastal spaces. Tidal, ecologically unique, and preternaturally vulnerable to human interference, estuaries may be seen as particularly rich bioregions where notions of belonging, ecological fragility, and existential liminality may be explored. Port Elizabeth's Swartkops estuary is amongst our most damaged, sandwiched as it is between the suburbs of Bluewater Bay and the townships of New Brighton, the bridge of the N2, the factories of North End. Brian Walter, erstwhile Hogsback resident, now living in Port Elizabeth, was shown the treasures and pains of the Swartkops by his father, and has written regularly about this diminutive bioregion of growth and memory. It has become an inescapable component of his identity. This conjunction of identity and place – both shifting, moody, at some level *unplaceable* – is the central theme of Walter's primary estuarine sequence from the 1999 collection *Tracks*, the nine-poem cycle entitled 'Swartkops'. This paper explores that cycle in relation to some brief comments on ecology, metaphor, and other forms of relevant discourse.

Keywords: estuary, Brian Walter, ecocriticism, poetry

A peculiar feature of environmental questions is how very soon they reach the limits of the competence of any one intellectual discipline (Clark 2011:4).

Ecologically-orientated literary critics have been subjected of late to various calls to familiarise themselves with scientific ecology in order to gain increased traction – increased relevance – in the current cultural-environmental rhetorical landscape. In an important but probably forgotten 1992 essay, Ivan Rabinowitz launched a stinging and eloquent broadside at what he then regarded as the ‘enfeebled discipline’ of orthodox, Arnoldian literary studies whose exponents knew ‘very little about ‘Nature’ or the ‘Environment’,’ next to nothing about ‘the chemistry of nutrient cycles, nothing about the classification of food chains, nothing about complexity-stability theory, nothing about the laws of ecological succession’, and more (Rabinowitz 1992:19 - 20). While this may remain true of many literary scholars, the phenomenal growth of the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment in the USA and elsewhere points to a turning of the tide. Nevertheless, Glen Love, eleven years after Rabinowitz, argues that ‘finding out what it means to be human’ is crucially dependent on knowledge of the ‘life-sciences’ (Love 2003:6). Given that the scientific and the socio-managerial modes of tackling global environmental problems are now unquestionably predominant, there is wisdom and pragmatism in this call. It particularly addresses the edge of activism towards which even scholarly ecocriticism is impelled, since an activism unsupported by science is increasingly liable to be dismissed as hysterically emotive and therefore discountable. It also has implications for the accusation, as levelled by Dana Phillips at eco-writers like Lawrence Buell and Barry Lopez, for instance, of ecocriticism’s habitual and simplistic default to varieties of ‘romantic’ ‘inner landscapes’, to a belief in transparent representationalism in language, and to an isolated ‘pastoral’ focus on an individual’s heightened experience of a putative but illusory ‘natural’ idyll (Phillips 2003:7 - 11).

In this essay, I want partly to agree with Phillips that ‘ecology’ itself needs to be ‘disenchant[ed]’ (41), its actual tentativeness noted, and to suggest that Walter evinces an appropriate self-deprecation amounting almost to pessimism. I also want to note the limitations on scientific and managerial discourses of environmental stewardship, and to suggest that, while residues of Romanticism do persist in contemporary poetry such as Brian Walter’s, it does neither Romanticism nor the poets (especially white poets) any service to stereotype them as politically unaware or socially sealed-off. Further, what one might term the ‘thick language’, the heightened

metaphoric mode of poetry itself, suggests that far from being eliminated by ecological statistics or sociological modelling, the sites, modes, and expressions of individuals' 'heightened experience' ought to remain central to an understanding of environmental problems and vital to their potential solutions. In short, there is an 'emotional quotient' to *all* social issues, including those affecting 'natural' environments, which scientific ecological studies simply do not address.

This is not to disparage the important, indeed vital, science being conducted, only to focus on the modes and rhetorical strategies by which science does what it does. It is not to fall into an oversimplified, C.P. Snow-like dichotomy of the scientific and humanistic disciplines, or to accede entirely to the 'disenchantment thesis' – the proposition that rationalistic science has robbed the natural world of any but instrumental value (Clark 2011:143). It is not a simplistic attempt to equate science as a research discipline (let alone 'ecology', frequently not seen as a proper science at all) with the industrial technologies which actually end up damaging sensitive ecosystems¹, nor to equate science with consequent managerial protection plans, even when those plans claim to be based rationalistically on that science. It is striking, however, to note the instrumentalist, anthropocentric language of, for instance, a 'Coastal Management Advisory Programme' to 'Protect Our Estuaries'. This pamphlet outlines the workings and biodiversity of estuaries (the kind of thing ecologists study) and proclaims them 'valuable' – but valuable because they are (in a bold headline) 'economically important' to 'commercial and recreational anglers', for 'healthy relaxation' (for humans, that is), and because 'they generate income through tourism, boating and sport fishing' (Department of Environmental Affairs, n.d.). A related rhetorical structure and mode characterises draft

¹ One example of the worrying disjunct, perhaps even ignorance, of discourses and values emerged recently when coal-mining adjacent to the ecologically and culturally sensitive Mapungubwe region of Limpopo was re-started after a moratorium; Coal of Africa CEO John Worthington made the utterly mystifying and misleading statement that, 'For us, conservation is a natural resource' (*Mail & Guardian* supplement 'Responsible Mining', October 28 2011: 1).

Integrated Management Plans produced for the Swartkops by Cape Action for People and the Environment (C.A.P.E.)²:

The Situation Assessment Report provided a sound basis from which to set a realistic and achievable Vision, as well as Strategic Objectives for the Swartkops Estuary and associated Nature Reserves. It also ensured that, at the time of the stakeholder workshops, expectations were aligned with the opportunities and constraints of the ecological and socio-economic environments prevailing at the time. The developed Vision and Strategic Objectives may not conflict with that developed for the CFR, and Strategic Objectives should form the foundation for quantitative Operational Objectives. Subsequent to extensive public participation, it became apparent that a Mission statement would also be required (Enviro-Fish 2010:3.1).

One notes here the stress on ‘align[ment]’ and ‘development’ (an ideologically heavily invested term nowadays) and the overarching appeal to ‘reason’ and ‘quantitative’ criteria. One queries the hidden assumptions behind what makes a ‘foundation’ ‘sound’ or what is ‘prevailing’ at the time specified. Poetry is designed, I take it, as a counterweight to such depersonalised, bureaucratic language, in which not only meaning but action appear to be already caught in an infinitude of deferrals. This, again, is not to suggest that such ‘Visions’ and ‘Objectives’ are not necessary, and one hopes successful; only to propose that something vital to human phenomenological experience of place, including experiences and expressions one might term ecocentric rather than anthropocentric, is missing. We exclude this dimension, I think, at our peril. This is also not to pretend that poetry hasn’t analogous limitations, or that in itself it offers some kind of solution to ‘saving the earth’, to echo John Felstiner’s titular phrase. In his introduction to *Can Poetry Save the Earth?*, Felstiner validly asks:

Realistically, what can poetry say, much less do, about global

² I am grateful to Tarryn Riddin of NMMU for making these available to me.

warming, seas rising, species endangered, water and air polluted, wilderness road-ridden, rain-forests razed, along with strip-mining and mountaintop removal, clearcutting, overfishing, overeating, overconsumption, overdevelopment, overpopulation, and so on and on? Well, next to nothing (2009:7).

Yet poets do insist on saying things, and as we shall see, Brian Walter touches on almost every one of these listed ills in his Swartkops estuary sequence of poems. Walter would surely agree with Felstiner's comment that it is 'a question of human consciousness' (2009: 13), of individuals' cumulative choices. Poetry raises the questions pertaining to, and calls for the redirection of, those choices.

Science, policy and activism point the way towards solutions, but something deeper must draw us there. It can be found in poetry's musical lift, attentive imagery, and shaping force, which stem from prehistory and live in today's magazines, slim volumes, readings, slams, songs, Web sites, blogs. In country or city, poems make a difference by priming consciousness (Felstiner 2009: 13 - 14).

Attentiveness to detail, in a manner analogous to science but with a bias towards the phenomenological and emotive experience of encountering that detail, is poetry's necessary purview. As Jonathan Bate, rephrasing Gaston Bachelard, puts it: 'the more attuned I am as I miniaturize the world, the better I dwell upon the earth' (Bate 2000:161). So much depends, in the end, on love, on its absences, and on the world's multiple impediments to it.

Estuaries are amongst our most treasured and threatened coastal spaces. Allanson and Baird note that 'during the 1980s and 1990s the demands being made on the estuarine environment, both directly and indirectly, by anthropogenic activities were considerable' – indeed, 'in danger of modifying river and tidal flow to such an extent that the estuarine habitat along the coast could disappear' (Allanson & Baird 1999:1). This is certainly only to be exacerbated by rising sea levels resulting from global warming. Tidal, ecologically unique, and preternaturally vulnerable to human interference, then, estuaries may be seen as particularly rich 'bioregions' where notions of belonging, ecological fragility, and existential liminality

may be explored³.

Port Elizabeth's Swartkops estuary is 'one of the most threatened freshwater systems in South Africa' (Enviro-Fish 2010:xv), sandwiched as it is between the suburbs of Bluewater Bay and the townships of New Brighton, the bridge of the N2, the factories of North End and, well up the river, the industrial towns of Uitenhage and Despatch. Whales breed in the waters just offshore; fishermen haunt the row of massive dolosse⁴ along the shoreline; luxury homes along the eastern rim are vulnerable to floods; flamingos sift the saltflats on the islands and curves; impoverished nomads stalk the siltbeds for pencil-bait while better-endowed birders scan for gulls and terns and sanderlings. Of South Africa's 255-odd estuaries (only 37 are deemed 'true' estuaries, permanently open to the sea), the Swartkops is ranked eleventh for its biological richness (Rump 2009:1). It contains the country's third-largest salt marsh, home to innumerable invertebrates as well as migrant birds which boost the wader population annually from 1800 to 4000. The 500-hectare area also includes the Valley Thicket-protecting Swartkops Nature Reserve, and the unofficial Aloe Reserve between Bluewater Bay and Amsterdamhoek. These are imperfectly policed spots of quasi-wilderness in a bioregion inescapably interlaced with human activity, from power generation to recreational fishing. A study published in 2000 noted a marked, potentially dangerous 20-year increase in the presence of heavy metals such as chrome, lead, zinc and titanium in Swartkops sediments (Binning & Baird

³ This is a somewhat contested term, as explored most recently in the collection *The Bioregional Imagination* (eds Glotfelty, Lynch and Armbruster 2011). In an essay therein on Douglas Livingstone's *A Littoral Zone*, I suggest that the fluidity of shoreline conditions makes the concept particularly difficult to sustain. Walter's poems' treatment of the shifting parameters of an estuary further exemplify this. As the C.A.P.E. management plans state, estuaries are 'not isolated systems', but rather represent an 'interface' of many systems (Enviro-Fish 2010: xvii), or what is sometimes termed an 'ecotone'. Nevertheless, the notion of the 'bioregion' remains useful in its insistence that places are defined in the first instance ecocentrically, that is by their unique and natural features (rather than, say political boundaries), which may or may not be regarded as including human involvements.

⁴ Large angular concrete shapes haphazardly piled up as a breakwater.

2003). Another, by Lamberth and Turpie, estimated some 35 tons of fish catch from the estuary, almost all by angling, a catch now under serious strain as smaller and smaller fish are being taken out (2003: 33). I quote here part of Lamberth and Turpie's general conclusion, not to disagree with their views, but rather to note the nature of their language and conceptualisations:

In general, the protection of estuarine fish resources will also depend on the sound management of activities which affect estuarine environments. Apart from the direct effect on fish stocks, recreational angling involves boat traffic and bait digging, leading to disturbance, trampling and depletion of prey for fish. More importantly, perturbations that occur in the marine environment or catchment may negatively impact on fish populations in estuaries. In particular, if freshwater requirements of estuaries are not adequately met, the resultant chemical and biophysical changes in the estuarine headwaters and in mouth condition can severely hamper fish recruitment For these reasons it is strongly advocated that a philosophy of ecosystem preservation be used in management policy in addition to individual species conservation efforts. Such policies will lead to more rational decisions ... (Lamberth & Turpie 2003:28).

Note, again, the language of conceptual generality; of traceable cause-and-effect, often involving largely invisible dimensions, such as the chemical; of the assumption of anthropocentric management policy as the primary motivator, actor, and beneficiary; the pervasive use of the passive voice ('are not met'; 'it is advocated'; 'be used'); and the culmination in the appeal to the rational as the ultimate arbiter of decision-making. To reiterate, I do not demur from such advocacy. I want only to point out its limits by asking these questions: What then of the individual fisherwoman, birder, boat-owner? Whose sense of belonging and responsibility (or responsiveness) here might underpin (or hinder) 'sound management'? What is the role of sensual, unique engagements with individual animals or specific places within the bioregion? Who is likely to love the place and its denizens sufficiently to motivate the enormous effort required in saving it, and why? Is the 'rational' the sole dimension of human experience? As the foregoing intimates, poetry suggests it is not. It is one under-estimated locus of exploring the non-

rational, phenomenological, corporeal and humane experience of ecological belonging which can mediate, as Felstiner puts it, between the egocentric and the ecocentric, or between the self-obsessed and the impossibly idyllic.

If I may indulge in a personal example of what I mean: a friend of mine lived in one of Amsterdamhoek's riverside homes; when his family sold, he paid a final visit to the estuarine environment his father had taught him to love. We boated and walked, and found things we would rather have not. I wrote a poem about it, 'Leaving the Swartkops':

On the mudbanks the whimbrels denied
the rents in time opening up as the tide
dropped. The marshes hissed unplaceably.

On the salt-pans, we found flamingos –
their long toes blessed the settled blue,
their necks curled innocuous as cup-hooks –
and then, like a sprung trap, a woman's
arm, the humerus clean as a candle, the black
hand intact, relaxed as pianist's.

We at least could still be brisk, our palms
reassured elbows, we were yet complete,
could savour even mud, spongy with dead
storms, and lucid prawns, and pencilbait,
and entrust ourselves to the boneless sea (Wylie 1996:33).

Brian Walter, erstwhile Hogsback resident and one of a group of poets from there who call themselves and regularly publish as the *Ecce Poets*⁵, now lives

⁵ The *Ecce* poets comprise Cathal Lagan, Norman Morrissey, Quentin Hogge, Laura Kirsten, Mariss Everitt, and Brian Walter. All have published volumes individually, but also in regular collaborations, amongst the most recent being *Spaces* (2009) and *Brood* (2010). Walter has also published the personal volumes *Mousebirds* (2008) and *Baakens* (2000). The group is a long-standing phenomenon of poetic commitment suffering equally long-standing critical neglect.

in Port Elizabeth. Like my other friend, he too was shown the treasures and pains of the Swartkops by his father, and has written regularly about this diminutive bioregion of growth and memory. In his collection, *Mousebirds*, Walter writes in several poems about the multi-layered condition of being at the shoreline. The 'placid estuaries of Swartkops' ('Poachers'; in 2008: 47) provide him with complex metaphors of being human, burdened and blessed with language and poetry. For instance, he writes of the neighbouring estuary of Ngqura (Coega) in expressly environmental terms: the poem carries the epigraph 'On being asked to join environmental action to protest industrial invasion of the old Coega wetland'. This is an event, Walter remarks with a pragmatic weariness, 'it's easier sometimes not to think'; but as poet he energises himself to list the complex richness of the interleaved human and natural history of the place, its

flamingoes, aloes, the metallic metaphor
of the flying blacksmith plover's tink, tink;
her pelargonium: new aluminium smelter.
There's poverty, employment, flamingoes,
development, holiness, dying species,
old African languages, and the old people,
their sacred landscape ... (50 - 51).

This is not merely list: the lines' careful juxtaposition of human and natural, of negative and positive presences, new against old, enact the difficult entanglements of estuarine activity. So, too, does the solitary metaphor, the 'industrial' characterisation of the birdcall as 'metallic'. The presence of metaphor as means of engagement with the world, as a reminder of awkward human-ness itself, is seldom far from the surface of Walter's ruminations: the poet is a kind of poacher, extracting his 'verbal abalone' (47) from the muddied tides of the world, a gleaner of meanings akin to the Lena figure of Athol Fugard's 1996 play *Boesman and Lena*, who reappears ghost-like in a number of poems. On the one hand metaphor is as vital as life, as in the poem 'Metaphor', from the 2010 *Ecca Poets* collection *Brood*:

Where the water spouts, I've formalized
a pond, lily pad and lotus flower,

that overflows into reed-beds,
in miniature: flowing north
from here, to the great green of the bay,
my bonsai Egypt, upper and lower,
the black and the red lands,
and when the sun comes, hieroglyphic
in a moment's meaning, my bone dry soul (Ecca 2010:8).

On the other hand, while the gardener-poet's creation of a bonsai encapsulation of the Nile delta, and perhaps of all estuaries, is an enactment of the operation of metaphor, there is a part of Walter's consciousness which recognises the reality that lies outside language. I will return briefly to this persistent epistemological problem towards the end. For now, I want to assert only that that reality, however perceived, its givenness as a conjunction of identity and place – shifting, moody, at some level *unplaceable* – is the central theme of Walter's primary estuarine sequence from the 1999 collection *Tracks*, the nine-poem cycle entitled 'Swartkops'.

The poems are dense and complex and beautiful, and I will try to tease out some primary themes; but to begin with, a brief summary of them. The first two – 'Looking back on a walk with my father' and 'Daughter of memory' – deal explicitly with memory, both concerned less with the father-figure than with that of a Lena-like poor woman, who becomes something of a tattered but eloquent, temporary and elusive 'muse' (5) for the poet as she searches for shellfish on the mudflats. These two interlocking ideas – childhood memory and the presence of intriguing poor folk – recur throughout the sequence. The third poem, 'Fishing', reinforces the sense of a cultural gap between the white boy-speaker and thin Xhosa children encountered during a fishing venture, in which attempts at communication fail, a 'nothingness of bait not taken' (7). Like several of the poems, such encounters are resonant of and with the national situation, to which Walter is keenly attuned. The fourth poem, 'Islands', examines with intimate and fond detail signs of the tiny denizens, plant and animal, of the reedbeds – and the discovery of signs of impoverished, marginal human habitation, too, leaving the speaker's mind faintly disturbed, 'jumbled as a pocket' (8). The tension here between notions of nature as pure or pristine, that impossibility, and human presences, is strong in a great deal of Walter's poetry generally. Poem

five, 'Grunters', returns to fishing, to the (one assumes) mentoring father-figure, and the theme of irretrievable pasts; fishing-lines become story-lines 'cast' out on the world's waters, 'languid' and tenuous, but life-affirming. The titles of the next two poems, 'Persephone' and 'Harpies', refer obviously to a literary and mythic dimension to some of Walter's verse. In the first, 'Persephone' is really his mother, plunging into the black depths of a sinkhole into which the boy-speaker's brother has vanished – not fatally, it seems – a momentary visit to the underworld, as it were. 'Harpies', on the other hand, is airborne, in which the seagulls 'scream' (11) the awareness of death and divisive histories, of the murder of Matthew Goniwe and the stark geographical divisions of apartheid which etch this landscape, but they are also custodians 'helping us preserve old faults' (12). The estuarine environment, here, is not only a 'netherworld' scarred with its layered pasts, but also a realm of renewal and 'possibilities' (11). 'Crustacean', like 'Grunters', is addressed to the father-figure, and relates the boy-poet's discomfiting experience of boiling alive and eating a crab, the discomfiture symbolic of 'that vain/ quest for humanity that defeated us all', and the crab itself becomes a signifier of the 'sideways' operations of self-deluding memory and the 'trap' of conscience. Subtly, broader politics haunt the backdrop of this poem, too. The final, key, and longest poem in the series, 'Tracks' (also the title poem of the whole collection), complexly overlays childhood memories with present geographies, which are geographies of emotion as well as of landscape, natural ecology and settlement. As with the other poems noted earlier, 'Tracks' reverts to Walter's characteristic musing upon the nature and inevitable presence of metaphor, the 'frail threads' of our reaching for adequacy of expression (15).

To draw out some prominent themes, then, and exemplify also the distinctive quality of the poetry itself, first, I want to notice the sense of geography and ecology. There is a precise, prismatic manner in which human activities are displayed as reliant upon, and imbricated with the textures of the place and its non-human denizens. The poems are pervasively fraught with the sense that the poet, remembering his visits as a boy, is primarily just that: a visitor. He is, or has become, knowledgeable and intimate with environmental details, but retains a sense of being the interloper, the plunderer, the voyeuristic birder with his binoculars. It is the poor folk, the bird-like, Lena figure, gleaning her very living from the mudflats, who truly

belong⁶. Belonging, in this case, creates muse-hood: the poet seems to gain poetic power from both the non-human and human icons of belonging in this shifting landscape. On the broadest scale, the poems collectively map the area: the seafront to the south, St Croix island offshore, the old and the new bridges, the railway tracks to the west, the old factories and sewage works, the townships of New Brighton, the ravaged hill of Coega Kop and the Zwartkoppes hills inland. Within this cartography, the precise details of interlocking lives emerge, between the tides, on the variable flats alongside and in the estuary: Walter mentions shellfish and waders, gulls and sedges, crabs and prawns, barbel and grunTERS, the smells of salt and the darkness of waters, shrubs and the paths of rodents, ‘the hidden little islanders’ (8)⁷. Throughout, however, these sundry non-human lives are seen as irremediably intertwined with and infiltrated by human lives, some of which are seen as scarcely less ‘natural’ or out-of-place, but others invasive. The final lines of ‘Tracks’ best exemplify this sense, a characteristic listing of iconic items of human imposition:

... fishing rod, knitting
needle, New Brighton, mother-
tongue, shanty-town and power (15).

Walter’s tone here is, however, not simplistically condemnatory of such productions: it reveals rather a sadness that they should be necessary at all. Again, what appears as a simple listing conforms to what Phillips has observed of recent ecology, not so much a utopian vision of wholeness, let alone moralistic ‘holism’, as a patchwork of cross-influences whose parameters are as much selected and metaphoric as ‘scientific’. The ‘list’ thus holds within it the as it were tidal tensions of the place – the visually

⁶ This is reminiscent also, perhaps, of the beach girl in James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Douglas Livingstone’s poem ‘Haunted Estuary’ (1991:11), also features a mysterious woman; perhaps there is a feminisation of the tidal zone that deserves further exploration.

⁷ Rodents are notably absent from Rump’s admittedly limited *Swartkops Field Guide* and from the C.A.P.E. management plans: poets can add to scientific enumeration and observation, too.

echoing but socially contrastive images of fishing-rod and knitting needle, for instance, and the subtle ambivalences of the word 'power' which echo throughout the sequence. Industrial power is carried via pipelines, railways, and electricity stations into social geography, and classic apartheid class and race divisions, productions of political power, are still visible and extant: 'The band [of South End] is white city,/ that is black; between, the brown' (11). Despite a tentative sense of integration, there is a discernible tension between the empowered and disempowered, and a socially and politically sensitive empathy with the latter. Empowerment (in more than one meaning) has meant the industrialised destruction of much of the estuarine ecosystem, and Walter is not blind to this (the evident depletion of fish stocks, for instance), even as he appears somewhat sceptical of mainstream conservation philosophies. In sum, then, no environment seems more suited to expressions of ambivalence about belonging than a tidal estuary.

A further dimension to Walter's treatment of the Swartkops estuary is how he mythologises it in more widely literary terms, which extend meaning beyond its immediate ecological and political context. The region is 'iBhayi's nether world' (4), a 'dead land' (5), a 'wetland underworld' (11) and 'mudflat netherworld/ where all dead and living flit/ together' (11), an 'underworld of darkness' in which, along with his drowning brother, the poet treads 'the fruitless waters of hell' (10). For all its persistent memories of fatherly guidance, family picnics, and boyish adventure, then, the estuary has for the mature poet become also a locus of death. There are not only the 'little skulls of mouse and shrew', the 'tiny island mementoes of death' (8); there is also the haunting knowledge of the place where 'those men/ killed Goniwe and his friends,/ stifled away their pulse of soul,/ burnt every clue of personality' (11). Importantly, it seems also to be – or threatens to be – the place of the death of communication. He cannot talk to the ribald Xhosa boys in 'Fishing'; refusing her fish, he can only watch the Lena-muse figure walk away from him. Generally, he has 'seen little poetry in this world' (6). In 'Grunters', the speaker does not reply to the father.

Yet, out of this geography of mingled pain and companionship, fecundity and silence, arises a communicability of the poems themselves, removed though they may now be from the ecology that prompted them. The Lena-like 'bait-woman' may never read these poems herself, but she has brought them into being, and has prompted at least the desire to somehow

locate the ‘old salted heart of all humankind’ (6). To focus briefly on this crucial figure in the sequence: like the gulls in ‘Harpies’, she serves to take the poet out of himself, to see himself momentarily from another perspective, as the alien and alienated birdwatcher confronted afresh with his humanity.

There is that in me that went with her,
and looked back to see a birdwatcher stand
like a fool, binoculars in hand. These salt
flats can fix those frail shapes of humanity
we hold most dear: the salt-flesh of heart,
an underfoot of mud, breath-lapped waters
that in their tides wash everything apart.

Out of this flux between fixity and tides, the poet fishes an awkward inspiration:

Of course, there’s always some catch. I found
no living verse on this pilgrimage. But her old
memory shone like a barbel, river-dark

This is not so much a dehumanisation of the woman as a recognition of her unreachability, her strange beauty in an environment now dominated by men mining ‘their barren salt works’ (5). If there remains here a ‘muddy whiff’ of Wordsworthian romanticisation of the peasant-in-the-landscape, it is fractured both by the political awareness underlying the sequence and the retreat of the woman into a grimly renewed strangeness. If in this poem she walks away from the poet into the ‘dead land’, like Charon ‘ferrying’ part of his being across the memory-erasing tidal river, she can return in memory in the next poem, ‘Daughter of Memory’ (an allusion no doubt to Mnemosyne). Here, ‘at last’, the poet deliberately tries to find those memories, like the mudprawns ‘caught/ in the tin the bait-woman brought’ (5). Though he is all but overwhelmed by ‘pointlessness’, the next two stanzas beautifully express both the difficulty and the treasure of excising meaning, poetry, from the flux of the world, the fragility of its imaginative fruit:

Still, I am out of my depth, trapped
in an image, where all must sway
with the wading stride of that woman.
Yet, there was a muddy whiff of grace,
for her poor beauty carried me away
from myself, to strive always to find
the old salted heart of all humankind.

But I've seen little poetry in this world.
We creep in a circle, swayed by wants
beyond our own. If I could only sketch,
in true fond fullness, our empty lives,
or feel the heart that moved her leg,
or watch her leg shape into shank,

then verse may well come home to me,
treading the mud into shapes of memory (6).

If there is one single most important theme to Walter's Swartkops sequence, it is this same, enduringly ambivalent trickiness of shaping in a world which largely shapes us. Shaping, indeed, is a key word in much of Walter's poetry. Even – perhaps particularly – memory serves us ill:

my memory crawls like a cancer,

a dark revenger, for screams recall
the death that lies on our past, that vain

quest for humanity that defeated us all,
that sideslip from our true selves,

that dance to find a life (13).

Just what our 'true selves' *are* remains an unresolved question, of course, and not just unresolved by Brian Walter. Part of the problem, as I mentioned early in this essay, are the ambivalently inadequate resources of language

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itself. In another poem, its setting about as far from the Swartkops as one can imagine – London’s Piccadilly station – congruent thoughts and images nevertheless emerge:

We place words into dark water,
let them sink: words, which were
in the beginning, on wide-spread
wings, are lost in the turning tides:
media, images, travel-technology ...

....

and now we place words together
artfully, and yet they sink away.
Something in the tongue is wrong ...
(‘Underground’; in *Ecce* 2008: 10).

Though the ‘artful’ resources of poetic metaphor might be the perceived solution to the flattening rhetorics of media and technology, Walter remains humble, if not pessimistic, about his task. At a nagging and deep level, the poet suspects and respects the primacy of total silence. This he tries to capture in ‘Intrusion’, in which, observing schoolchildren trying to create their own poems, he finds himself in a mesh of ambivalent relationship with their presumed inner worlds:

I steal their silence: try to enter it.
But my thoughts run wild about the township,
out over the flamingo pans, flood flats
of the Swartkops River, where ironic water

shapes back the shacks of corrugated sheets.
I write on their silence, harness the zeal
of their dreams, till their own quiet becomes
both medium and means: I must keep words out (2007: 9).

Walter’s inability to ‘enter’ fully the township kids’ specific linguistic worlds prompts an inadvertent foray into the estuarine environment of his own childhood, a place as fluid as his own unconscious and that has come to

signify that inescapable component of his identity. Ironically, it is in the shared quiet of the creative moment that he shares most with the children: to communicate fully, paradoxically, is to remain wordless.

Nevertheless, in the tidal oscillation between creation and pointlessness, between voice and silence, metaphor itself emerges, the linguistic moderator between them. Walter might well agree with Stephen Jay Gould, that 'The world is never simple; it doesn't even provide apt metaphors' (quoted by Phillips 2003:52), to the extent that it is we who make metaphors, not 'the world'. But he would perhaps not deny the proclamation that metaphor apparently makes, namely that world and language are nevertheless co-dependent in some ways. Is it really coincidental that not too far down the coast, at Blombos Cave, was discovered mankind's earliest artistic artefact, an ochre fragment cross-hatched with lines not unlike the crossings of white wave-edges on the nearby beach? Or that even as I was revising this essay, news came that from that same cave has been unearthed evidence of the mixing of paints, pushing human artistry back even further, to 100 000 years ago. Would it be too much to suggest that where the patternings and inter-penetrations of the world are most vivid – the tidal world of the coast – art first mimicked its surroundings by reproducing those patterns – that metaphor itself is, as it were, estuarine? In this sequence as a whole, then, Walter – keenly attuned to the possibilities of environment and its imaginative potentials, but also to the limitations on such imagining – strives to believe, against all the signs in the world, that 'perhaps not all life/waits to serve some selfish turn' and that 'picking through this mud, [we] will more easily find a kinder way' (12).

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Versifying the Environment and the 'Oil Encounter': Tanure Ojaide's *Delta Blues & Home Songs*

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Abstract

This paper focuses on Nigeria's Niger Delta using literary representations from the region to interrogate the oil encounter and an exploration of its impact on social and environmental structures. The paper situates Tanure Ojaide's *Delta Blues & Home Songs* (1998) within the discourse of environmental justice and ecocriticism, reflecting on the poet's excoriation of the oil encounter as the harbinger of environmental degradation. Of particular interest is the unique and alternative insight – a kind of insider/indigenous knowledge – this text provides in the agitations for environmental remediation and social justice. The paper argues that through the geography of lived and imagined memory of the pre-oil exploration past, the poet stretches our scientific and technological imagination in proffering solutions to the environmental and social challenges that attend the oil encounter. The poet calls for a lived kind of environmentalism as he invites the reader to inhabit the cultural world of his Niger Delta where he imaginatively recalls the past – of his childhood – of fishing and farming; when 'the old ways were still very vibrant' (Ojaide, *Poetic Imagination* 1996:121). The paper concludes that this near utopian past which the poet versifies, becomes a model for the remediation of the oil-polluted Niger Delta environment. Part of the work of this paper, then, reflects on the particular contributions that literary and cultural perspectives can offer in apprehending the twin issues of justice – environmental and social – occasioned by the oil encounter, and how these perspectives might fruitfully enter into a conversation that is largely dominated by the sciences.

Keywords: Oil Encounter, Niger Delta, Environmentalism, Social Justice, Ecocriticism

Introduction

In discussing the coastlines and littoral zones of Nigeria's Niger Delta, it is not possible to avoid reference to the 'Oil Encounter'. The term Oil Encounter can be credited to the Indian writer and critic Amitav Ghosh, who in his 2002 essay, 'Petrofiction: the oil encounter and the novel', suggests that there is little presence of oil in the cultural imaginaries of world literature. Ghosh declares that 'In fact, very few people anywhere write about the Oil Encounter ... the silence extends much further than the Arabic or English-speaking worlds' (2002:77). Crucially, Ghosh's interest is in 'epic narratives' of the oil encounter in American fiction and the high-powered politics that oil generates within the US polity and the Arab world. The history of oil in the America-Arab relation resonates with the history of several bitter wars fought in the last half century (including most recently the two Gulf Wars), and the politics of silence and conspiracy theories that oil has generated in America-Persia-Arab nexus. It is to that extent that there has been perceived silence, reluctance, and 'embarrassment verging on the unspeakable' (2002:75), which Ghosh characterises as a 'petrofiction barrenness' among writers – both in America and in the Arab world. I shall return to Ghosh later in this paper to discuss the implication of his pronouncements on Africa's cultural representation of the oil encounter, and how his critique illuminates my argument. Using Ghosh's argument as a framework, this paper will then examine representations of Nigeria's Niger Delta in a body of literature that has been stimulated by the commoditization of oil since the 1970s, and which captures the trajectories that oil has come to map out in the lives of the common people around these coastal and littoral zones. Imaginings of the oil encounter continue to underscore issues of environmental degradation exacerbated by oil exploration and commodification in the region.

Ecocriticism in its general sense has become a contested issue in African literary scholarship today. This stems from its inability to take note of the cultural specificity of the African context in addressing environmental

justice and sustainable development – perceived as the two most significant environmental issues in Africa in general and the Niger Delta in particular (see for instance Harvey 1996; Guha 1997; Comfort 2002; Evans 2002; Reed 2002; and Sze 2002). Critics have argued that the values espoused in Anglo-American ecocriticism are exclusivist and elitist in their application to ecological challenges in a terrain like the Niger Delta. Since it tends to valorise aestheticism and privilege the natural ecology over human ecology, mainstream ecocriticism divorces the natural world from the human. In its bid to promote the conservation of nature it excludes the people who live in environments considered to hold particular natural value, and tends to be oblivious of the socio-cultural ties of the people to the ecosystem¹.

The failure to put the African context in perspective perhaps explains the American ecocritic William Slaymaker's accusation that African writers and critics do not take ecocriticism seriously. He contends:

There is no lack of writing in Africa that might fall under the rubric of nature writing. Black writers take nature writing seriously ... but may have resisted or neglected the paradigms that inform much of global ecocriticism' (2001:132 - 133).

Slaymaker's assertion is partly true to the extent that the environmental 'preservation strategy' in the Global North is treated with suspicion and found to have 'disastrous consequences in the Third World' (Curtin 1999:5). Anthony Vital has insightfully argued that ecocriticism will only be treated

¹ Cf. Guha, Ramachandra 1997. *The Authoritarian Biologist and the Arrogance of Anti-Humanism: Wildlife Conservation in the Third World*. *The Ecologist* 27, 14-20. Also see Vital, Anthony 2005. *Situating Ecology in Recent South African Fiction: J.M. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals* and Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness**. *Journal of Southern African Studies* 31.2: 297-313. A more recent essay of Anthony Vital in 2008: *Toward an African Ecocriticism: Postcolonialism, Ecology and *Life & Times of Michael K.** *Research in African Literatures* 39, 1:87-121, is cited and discussed in the body of this paper, where he too argues for a locally-rooted aesthetic in the discourse of ecocriticism. His position corroborates mine as I attempt to extend the debate in this piece.

with less resistance, in a terrain like the Niger Delta landscape, if it can be flexible enough to provide answers which will ‘be rooted in local (regional, national) concerns for social life and its natural environment’ (2008:88). What constitutes Nature writing – if that is what Slaymaker takes ecocriticism to mean – in the Niger Delta literary tradition is an ecological advocacy which laments cultural deracination of the people and environmental degradation fostered by the commoditization of natural resources. These concerns are not so popular with mainstream ecocriticism hence the call for an environmental justice mode of ecocriticism which considers the cultural cohesiveness between the human and the non-human world since none exists outside of the other. This has become the focus of much African scholarship on environmental criticism and this study locates itself as a critical engagement with this emerging tradition.

Environmental justice criticism combines environmentalism and social justice by drawing upon other counter discursive paradigms such as marginality theory, ethnic/minority discourses, ecofeminism, and postcolonial discourses to call attention to the ways the commoditization of natural resources such as oil, and ‘the disparate distribution of wealth and power often leads to correlative social upheaval ...’ (Adamson *et al.* 2002:5), not only in Nigeria’s Niger Delta, but other sites where natural resources are commoditised. The call for environmental justice, as championed by the environmental activist-scholar-writer Ken Saro Wiwa, has fostered a radical literary output from the region. This literature calls for an environmental justice that privileges sensitivity toward the natural habitat in tandem with the indigenous people who depend on the ecosystem for their survival. Joe Ushie rightly notes that, ‘the Niger Delta literary landscape has continued to flourish even as its physical environment is wilting’ (2006:22).

The Niger Delta, Oil and Ojaide’s Imagination

The Niger Delta is a densely populated region. It has an estimated population of 31 million people and covers about 75, 000 square kilometres, making it one of the largest wetlands in the world (Obi & Rustad 2011:3). The region is a vast coastal plain in the southernmost part of Nigeria, where West Africa’s longest river empties into the Atlantic Ocean. James Tsaaior describes the region as a ‘reservoir of priceless mineral resource’ with ‘rich,

fertile and alluvial wealth with prodigious crude oil deposit' (2005:72). This vast region of wetland was once called the Oil Rivers² because of its history of bearing two types of oil resource: palm oil and crude oil. This history dates back to the 1890s with the palm oil trade before and during colonialism in the Nigeria. At the time palm oil and palm kernel were the main exports of the Niger Delta and Britain's Royal Niger Company quickly seized on this and established a monopoly. Palm oil flowed to Britain and elsewhere in Europe, where it served to power the apparatuses that drove Europe's industrial prosperity and colonial incursion (Peel 2010).

In 1956, Royal Dutch Shell discovered crude oil in commercial quantity at Oloibiri, an Ijaw town in the Niger Delta, and began exportation in 1958. Today, there are over 606 oil fields in the Oil Rivers of the Niger Delta, and Nigeria is the largest oil producer in Africa, with an average 2.6 million barrels of oil per day. It is the second largest oil-bearing nation in Africa after Libya, with a proven crude oil reserve of 32 billion barrels³. Since 1975, oil accounts for about three-quarters of government revenue and 95 per cent of the national export earnings. Much of the natural gas extracted in oil wells in the Delta is flared and wasted into the air every day. The environmental devastation associated with the industry and the lack of equitable distribution of the oil wealth have been the source of numerous environmental movements and inter-ethnic conflicts in the region, including recent guerrilla activities by the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), the Niger Delta Volunteer Force (NDVF) and other interstitial resource-rebel groups⁴.

² Darah, Godini. 'Revolutionary Pressures in Niger Delta Literatures' *The Nigerian Guardian* June 28, 2009.

³ The Nigerian Vanguard 'Editorial' February 22, 2011.

⁴ Cf. Alao, Abiodun 2007 *Natural Resources and Conflict in Africa: The Tragedy of Endowment*. New York: University of Rochester Press. With detailed analyses of facts, figures, and concrete examples, Alao discusses the relationship between natural resources and conflicts in Africa, of which Nigeria, with its vast oil reserve, is a case in point. See also Obi, Cyril and Siri Aas Rustad 2011. *Oil and Insurgency in the Niger Delta: Managing the Complex Politics of Petro-Violence* Sweden/London: Nordic Africa Institute/Zed Books.

Tanure Ojaide⁵ was born in this oil-rich but economically impoverished area of Nigeria, in 1948, a period he designates as ‘an age of innocence in a rural home in the Delta region of Nigeria’ (1996:121). He was raised by his maternal grandmother, Amreghe, in a riverine rural environment. Every first-born male child in his Urhobo ethnic extraction is traditionally deemed a priest. Ojaide has grown to become a socio-cultural priest, an environmental and minority priest of awareness. Ojaide studied under the tutelage of several Urhobo traditional artists. Okitiakpe of Ekakpamre is largely instrumental to his studying Udje dance and songs – a traditional form of poetry – which he later translated into English and continuously deploys in his poetic oeuvres (see *The Fate of Vultures* 1990). Ojute and Omokomoko are other artists who exposed him to the breadth and depth of Urhobo poetry, philosophy of life and traditional aesthetics. He uses his Urhobo heritage to poetic advantage by exploring the *Ivwri* philosophy and using Urhobo folklore as a foreground. The *Ivwri* philosophy is a rich cultural heritage that draws upon the legends of past heroes who become models in the society for others to emulate. Thus we see Ojaide’s continual reference to mythical and legendary figures such as Mukoro Mowoe, Essi, Ogodogbo and Aghwana. His poetry is not only engaging because of its technical qualities, but also its cultural integrity. Ojaide succeeds in apprehending the environmental degradation of the Niger Delta, the devastation unleashed upon the local population, and the plight of victims (casualties) caught up in the race for oil and the politics which attend that encounter.

⁵ Ojaide is not the type of poet one remembers by only one good work; he is prolific. His poetry publications include: *Children of Iroko & Other Poems* (1973); *Labyrinths of the Delta* (1986); *The Eagle’s Vision* (1987); *The Endless Song* (1989); *The Fate of Vultures* (1990); *The Blood of Peace* (1991); *Daydreams of Ants* (1997); *Delta Blues & Home Songs* (1998); *Invoking the Warrior Spirit: New & Selected Poems* (1999); *In the Kingdom of Songs: A Trilogy* (2002); *I Want to Dance & Other Poems* (2003); *In the House of Words* (2006); *The Tales of the Harmattan* (2007); *Waiting for the Hatching of a Cockerel* (2008), and *The Beauty I Have Seen* (2010). His writings are consistently rich and deeply rooted in the Delta region.

Ojaide's poetry can be situated within what the critic Funso Aiyejina calls the 'Alter/native tradition' in Nigeria poetry. Describing Ojaide as a 'new traditionalist' (1988:124), Aiyejina argues that the writings of Ojaide's generation – the second generation of modern African literature (see Adesanmi & Dunton 2005) – marked a paradigm shift. These writers moved away from the use of far-fetched, high-sounding English images and resorted to native and traditional metaphors. Free of idiosyncratic language and arcane imagery, Ojaide's poetry relies on parables and references to traditional rituals adjusted to contemporary purposes, such as his crusade for restoration of the ecosystem in the Niger Delta and the improvement of the living condition of the people in this region.

Ojaide engages metaphors, images and legends from folklore and history to speak about the Niger Delta conditions – of environmental and social injustice. In a book of essays written in honour of Ojaide titled *Writing the homeland: the poetry and politics of Tanure Ojaide*, Onookome Okome argues that Ojaide is well aware of the social burden that a poet in a distressed society must bear; and he takes on this role with fortitude. Okome maintains that social responsibility is for Ojaide, 'the very soul of writing' (2002:158). Hence, Ojaide's poetry is essentially about the Niger Delta environment in which he first experienced life; a region that continues to capture his imagination as he attempts to apprehend the absence of environmental and social justice for the autochthonous people and their land. The fast fading world of the pre-oil exploration Niger Delta remains the site where Ojaide locates this collection.

The collection, *Delta Blues & Home Songs*, is divided into two sections. The first, *Delta Blues*, dedicated to the memory of Ken Saro-Wiwa, is concerned with the degradation of the Deltascape where he valorises his childhood, becoming the touchstone for measuring and judging the attitude towards the environment by successive governments and the multinational oil corporations. The second section, *Home Songs*, has some folkloric poems that have personal and local concerns. They are dedicated to well-meaning individuals who have influenced the poet's life during his formative years. Through the memory of lived-childhood experiences, Ojaide takes us on a voyage to this environment, where he describes the beauty of a self-sustaining agrarian culture and the subsistent abundance that was the Delta economy before oil was discovered.

In 'When green was the lingua franca' Ojaide recounts with sincerity how the Delta once was. He describes the pastoral abundance of the Delta, through rustic memories of childhood:

My childhood stretched
one unbroken park,
teeming with life.
In the forest green was
the lingua franca
with many dialects.
Everybody's favourite
water sparkled
Undergrowth kept as much
alive as overgrowth, the delta
alliance of big and small,
market of needs, arena
of compensation for all (12-13).

Here, he deploys metaphors to describe the centrality of the greenery to his childhood's bucolic existence. The Niger Delta, just like the larger Nigerian federation, is a linguistically heterogeneous society with about forty languages and over two hundred dialects. Pidgin is the lingua franca of this region. Pidgin was a contact language around the coastal areas with the earliest European merchants from Portugal, France and later, Great Britain. Over time and as a result of British colonialism, the Pidgin language now has English as its major substrate. It is this linguistic image Ojaide draws on to demonstrate the aura of cultural and ecological equilibrium. The greenery, as the lingua franca, signifies the evident agrarian abundance, vegetative richness and stable biodiversity that the Delta was once noted for. We notice a sense of nostalgic retrospection in an idyllic ambience in the way he portrays the 'forest' as evenly spread in its 'green' foliage, and the 'water sparkling', a metaphor of scenic beauty and pristine orderliness.

With this near utopian memory and geographic description of the Deltascape, Ojaide draws our attention to the subtlety of his lived-environmentalism. This subtle environmentalism makes no less a damning commentary on the degradation of the ecosystem brought about by oil

exploration and neoliberal capitalism. The following lines juxtapose the Edenic picture created above with the brutal reality of oil exploration as the poet excoriates Shell (one of the major multinational oil corporations mining oil in Nigeria's Niger Delta) for the ecological invasion and commoditization of the region. Further on in the same poem:

Then Shell broke the bond
with quakes and a hell
of flares. Stoking a hearth
under God's very behind!
I see victims of arson
wherever my restless soles
take me to bear witness.
The Ethiopie waterfront
wiped out by prospectors—
so many trees beheaded
and streams mortally poisoned
in the name of jobs and wealth! (13)

In Ojaide's counter-hegemonic discursive strategy, Shell Oil Corporation – as well as other multinational oil corporations mining oil in the region – is responsible for the despoliation of the Delta environment and the incessant violence that now threatens the existence of the human population and other eco-forms. According to the poet, Shell has broken the bond between the people and the environment and committed a sacrilegious act against God by heating up the firmament with its flares. This abomination has led to frenzy in the race to exploit the region's alluvial wealth. The poet deploys idioms of violence: 'victims of arson', 'wiped out', 'beheaded', 'mortally poisoned', as well as glamorous images of neoliberal capitalism, 'jobs', 'wealth', to suggest that the oil bounty has paradoxical effects: with wealth comes death and destruction. This is because the race for oil in Nigeria is not shaped by social justice. This gives credence to Robert Young's argument that poverty and starvation suffered by the marginalised are often not the mark of an absolute lack of resources, but derive 'from failure to distribute them equitably' (quoted in Okuyade 2011:127). The once healthy landscape has become degraded, polluted and endangered by oil spillages and gas flaring,

among other environmental hazards. This has, in turn, taken its devastating toll on the flora, fauna and people of the Niger Delta.

My argument does not suggest that Ojaide disavows oil exploration, but that he privileges moral sensitivity and distributive social justice in the face of such an industrial drive. This position becomes even more pertinent when placed in the context an illustrative recent news report by Agence France Presse (AFP) on the case between Shell and the Bodo community in Nigeria. The case was heard in a London Court (not in Nigeria) and judgement was passed in favour of the Bodo community:

A spokesman for Shell's Nigerian operations, the Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC), said it would pay compensation but said the process could take *several months*. But lawyer Martin Day, representing the Bodo community, said he would be pressing for 'adequate compensation *immediately*'. 'This is one of the most devastating oil spills the world has ever seen and yet it had gone almost unnoticed until we received instructions to bring about a claim against Shell in this country,' he said⁶ (e.a.).

In this report two things stand out: firstly, it seems that justice is unavailable to the poor namely, the Bodo community, in the Nigerian justice system, hence the case was taken to a London court. Secondly, from this quotation we notice that Shell lacks the moral urgency to address the environmental hazards its operations continue to cause in Nigeria. Take for instance the dismissive response devoid of remorse and moral obligation to a community that hosts its exploration. It invariably demonstrates that environmental as well as social justice in marginalised spaces is not a right but a privilege. This privilege is at best granted by courts of law – apparently the only hope of the subaltern – and dispensed with reluctant levity by the multinational oil corporations and the Nigerian State – or at worst, it is exacted by violence as the aggrieved take to the Delta creeks and become insurgent.

If 'When green was the lingua franca' is a call for environmental

⁶ 'Shell admits 'devastating' Nigeria oil spills' *AFP News Agency*, August 3, 2011.

justice, 'Delta blues' is a dirge. The poet laments the violence, death, greed, apathy, vested interests, and what Ramachandra Guha, in an essay on the 'Arrogance of Anti-humanism' calls 'green imperialism' (1997:19). Here, I use the phrase to mean the commoditization of the Delta and the privileging of the oil mineral it bears over the existence of people who inhabit the land—in one sense it is an economic re-colonisation. In the poem Ojaide writes:

This share of paradise, the delta of my birth,
reels from an immeasurable wound.
Barrels of alchemical draughts flow
From this hurt to the unquestioning world
This home of salt and fish
stilted in mangroves, market of barter,
always welcomes others—
hosts and guests flourished
on palm oil, yams and garri.
This home of plants and birds
least expected a stampede;
there's no refuge east or west,
north or south of this paradise (21).

With a mournful cadence, Ojaide decries the despoliation of the Delta biodiversity: a landscape of peace and hospitality with its evergreen foliage now wilting under the violence of pollution and exploitation. As he recounts the plight of the marginalised people of the Niger Delta, he also conjures the picture of the vanishing abundant natural riches of the Delta landscape. The rain forest is being stripped of trees, which used to serve as protection and security for the people of the Delta; one of which is the 'Iroko' (African teak). 'The forest is levelled' for commercial reasons, and animals and other avian species migrate to areas where they can survive since they have been dislodged from the Delta forest. The fish and other aquatic organisms that lodge in the Delta Rivers cannot survive the heat from incessant oil spillages and gas flaring. This in turn marks the declining supply of fresh water and thus amounts to environmental degradation. The after effect is the sharp decline of agricultural productivity and dearth of a fishing economy which the terrain compels the people to rely on.

In graphic metaphoric lines, Ojaide mourns this treachery against the people. The symbol of their struggle is the person of Ken Saro-Wiwa, and in the poem 'Wails', he offers a dirge for a friend and fellow artist. The poem is modelled after his native Urhobo *Udje* dance songs:

Another ANA meeting will be called
and singers will gather
I will look all over
and see a space
that can take more than a hundred-
the elephant never hides...
Aridon, give me the voice
to raise this wail
beyond high walls.
In one year I have seen
my forest of friends cut down,
now dust taunts my memory (17).

Ken Saro-Wiwa's⁷ execution was no doubt a cathartic moment in Nigeria's history under the brutality of General Sani Abacha's regime; certainly it was so for Nigerian writers on whom it had a devastating emotional impact and

⁷ Kenule Beesom Saro-Wiwa was significant to many people in, and outside, Nigeria. He was a writer, scholar and environmental rights activist. In Nigeria, he is remembered as a politician, successful businessman, newspaper columnist, television script writer/producer, and a prolific writer. His detractors demonise him for his role in the Nigerian Civil War of 1967-1970. He was said to have supported the Nigerian Federal troops against the secessionist Biafrans, where he was rewarded with the post of Sole Administrator of Bonny Council in Eastern Delta. He is seen to have benefitted from the lopsided federal politics of the Nigerian federation he later campaigned against in the 1990s (see Wiwa, Ken 2000. *In The Shadow of a Saint*. Toronto: Knorf Canada; Meja-Pierce, Adewale 2005. *Remembering Ken Saro-Wiwa and Other Essays*. Lagos: The New Gong; Hunt, J. Timothy 2006. *The Politics of Bones*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart).

for the international community, whose support Saro-Wiwa had cultivated and enjoyed⁸. Ojaide in this poem confronts the tragedy of contemporary Nigeria, whose tragic hero Saro-Wiwa and his struggle becomes. He metaphorically refers to Saro-Wiwa as 'the elephant' whose absence would be conspicuous when 'Another ANA meeting will be called' (17), referring to the Association of Nigerian Authors which Saro-Wiwa once presided over. Charles Bodunde argues that 'Ojaide interprets Saro-Wiwa's death within the wider contexts of political struggle and national tragedy', so that 'Saro-Wiwa's case symbolises the aspirations and will of a community and the complexity of political struggle' (2002:201).

In a melancholic, disconsolate mood, the poet announces with tearful cadences:

I must raise the loud wail
so that each will reflect his fate.
Take care of your people,
they are your proud assets.
The boa thoughtlessly devours
Its own offsprings, Nigeria's
A boa-constrictor in the world map (17-18).

⁸ To the international community and among his admirers within Nigeria, Saro-Wiwa will forever be remembered as the champion of environmental rights and social justice, especially for minority peoples around the world. His campaigns against environmental pollution and decimation of the agricultural economy of the Ogoni People, for which the Nigerian Government and Shell Petroleum were complicit, attracted international attention; especially his success at framing the Ogoni (minority) agitations within the discourse of Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organisation (UNPO) in the Hague. In November 1995, he, together with eight other Ogoni leaders were executed under spurious accusation of inciting and conspiracy to murder four Ogoni elders who had been lynched to death by some irate mob in 1993. His death brought international opprobrium to the Sani Abacha's dictatorship in Nigeria, which led to international sanctions and expulsion of Nigeria from the Commonwealth Organisation in 1995.

Ojaide discovers in the courageous and irrepressible minority rights leader a veritable human shield against totalitarian regimes, just like the elephant shields its young ones from the predator's rampages. Ojaide's image of the elephant to describe Saro-Wiwa as a hero who looms large in the minds of the people, calls to mind the fate of the elephant, a one-time Africa's priceless possession. The elephant was once a symbol of Africa's pride, strength and abundance, but its tusks served as the basis for the illicit ivory trade by colonial imperialist and African collaborators. This trade saw the death of many elephants as Africa's fauna and flora were plundered to serve as raw materials to develop Europe.

Today, the elephant, once a symbol of Africa's economic stability, is an endangered species on the African soil. It is this image of the endangered elephant Ojaide draws on to describe the death of Saro-Wiwa, a voice of truth and a symbol of the people's struggle against oppression and exploitation. The poet concludes climactically:

Streets echo with wails.
A terrible thing has struck the land,
everyone is covered with shame or sorrow--
this death exceeds other deaths.
this news cannot be a hoax;
for the love of terror,
they have murdered a favourite son,
and eight other bearers of truth (18).

Tayo Olafioye remarks that 'Ojaide is able to transform the image of pain through satire into artistic form because he is not only an artist but the voice of his people, more accurately, the Oracle of the Delta' (quoted in Okuyade 2011:124). In the traditional setting of the Niger Delta and perhaps elsewhere, an oracle – the knower and seer of hidden things – was not only concerned with lamentations and condemnation of ills in the society. Oracles also prescribed ways of addressing these ills and providing workable alternatives to ameliorate the consequences of those challenges that plague society. Thus, Ojaide is not an oracle of doom and condemnation, but also of hope: a visionary in the restoration of the harmony that once was in the environment. He believes that since he has been a witness of the good past

which he succinctly 'versifies' in this poetry collection, he knows what is hidden or lost in that past that could serve as a model for rebuilding the crumbling structures of the present.

This poem is not all about grief and despondency; there is a glimmer of hope in the images of renewal and continuity signified by the transfer of the toga of heroism and leadership from one activist to another:

After the warrior-chief's fall,
somebody else will carry the standard-
Boro left for Saro-Wiwa to take over,
the stump will grow into another *iroko*.
The hardwood shield is broken,
the people are exposed to a storm of abuse;
the diviner's spell is broken
& everybody's left in the open.
But the diviner's words are never halted
by death—*Ominigbo* is my witness (19).

The African belief in 'life after death' (Ojaide 1996) resonates in most of the poems dedicated to Saro-Wiwa and the other eight, and this becomes a source of consolation and beams a flicker of hope and sustenance for the continued agitations and demands for social justice in the Niger Delta. This position is consistent with the earlier argument that Ojaide is an oracle of good tidings and not one of doom; an unapologetic optimist and healer of wounds.

In 'Elegy for nine warriors', for instance, the poet engages the metaphor of this continued existence of life even in the great beyond to portray the 'Ogoni Nine' as heroes, 'the nine warriors', who have become immortalised by their noble attempt to rescind the hegemonic order and liberate the Delta people:

Those I remember in my song
will outlive this ghoulish season,
dawn will outlive the long night.
I hear voices stifled by the hangman,
an old cockroach in the groins of Aso Rock.

Those I remember with these notes
walk back erect from the stake.
The hangman has made his case,
delivered nine heads through the sunpost
and sore'd his eyes from sleepless nights.
The nine start their life after death
as the street takes over their standard (25).

Ojaide's passion for exploring traditional African folklore is undeniable. Writing in a tradition of abuse poetry modelled after the Urhobo Udje cursing song, Ojaide chides and derides the notorious hangman responsible for the death of these great men, whose blood will continue to whet the appetite for the demand for social justice in the troubled region of the Niger Delta and Nigeria at large. In this poem Ojaide employs repetitive words for effectiveness and the advancement of the intensity of the message. The repeated use of 'those I remember' reinforces the persona's homage to the Ogoni Nine and his unflinching support in the cause they died for. The poem reads like a chant to herald 'the nine' into the bliss of the afterlife, so that their demise does not leave the people in a state of despair but charges them into action to actualize the demands for which they lost their lives.

Ojaide frowns upon the socio-economic imbalance which has generated political confrontation, causing the Delta people so much pain. This has alienated them from the gains and shortfalls of their God's given wealth as they live in squalor while the resources from their land build mansions elsewhere. The poem 'Abuja' laconically exemplifies this trope:

Here where all cardinal points meet in a capital
here where rocks raise homes to the sky
here where the savannah rolls over the soil
the coven where witches plot the demise of others
this is where chiefs celebrate on the sweat of slaves
this is where range chickens consume and scatter
leftovers
this is where the hyena's den is guarded by rings of packs
this is where the hyena cornered the hare

and swallowed it, leaving no scent for a trace
this is where the boa-constrictor strangles its catch
this is where robbers boast of their callous acts
& laugh at the plight of a hundred million cowards
this is where the national flag covers a cesspool
this is where a god led his worshippers to die
this is where I weep for my entire land
(41).

The metaphor of inequality and lopsidedness in the Nigerian polity is what runs through the lines of this deeply lyrical poem. The beauty of the lyricism, I think, highlights the disconnection between the government and the governed, between the origination of the wealth and where it is amassed. The image of exploitation and depravity of the people which Abuja⁹ represents is discernible in the poet's continuous repetition of 'this is where'. Thus, the poem becomes a dirge, lamenting the continued denial of the people of their rights to the wealth of their environment. The poem becomes a cry for what could have been for his homeland and what should not be the order of things in the seat of power that is Abuja. The repetition of 'here' and 'where' invokes in the reader a sense of alienation which the people experience even in their own country, and this reinforces that category of 'place', which represents the binaries of the metropolis and the provincial; the centre and the margins. This trope in much of postcolonial discourses continues to define not only literatures from Africa but also politics and governance in Africa. Tijan Sallah notes that while 'place conveys a deep sense of history' (1995:21), Abuja becomes the usurper of God's blessings of the Niger Delta

⁹ Abuja, the Capital City of Nigeria, is a post-Civil War creation of the federal military government of Murtala Mohammed in 1976. It was built from the immense wealth that the 1970s Oil Boom had brought to Nigeria. The money which should have been deployed to other vital sectors of the country's economy, and to cushion the effect of pollution the oil exploration had brought on the Niger Delta environment, was used to build a brand new city for the vain glory of Nigeria's political elites. Abuja exemplifies the postcolonial extravagance and self-serving interests which seem to define politics and leadership in Nigeria.

people. Everything she produces is carted away to develop Abuja. Thus Abuja becomes everything the Niger Delta is not.

Ojaide's ability to measure the Deltascape within the range of his poesy is borne out of his deeply rooted and sustained relation with the region. The unhappy shift as represented in the metaphor of a falling landscape into the now visible ruins can be traced to the absence of vision in governance. This according to the poet is manifest in the ways in which unthinking and heartless rulers (not leaders) have shattered the people's hopes and usurped their means of livelihood. This sad situation is grimly captured in couplets in the poem, 'Army of microbes':

To the usurper-chieftain who has set his rabid guard dogs
against streets of impoverished ones
To the uniformed caste of half-literate soldiery
who close people's mouth with trigger-ready hands
To the ruling council fat in the neck and thigh
but whose plans make wraith of workers
To those who have creased faces of farmers and fishers
with lines of hunger and pain
To the cabal of loyalty and fealty
that sold the rest for coded Swiss accounts
To the petty head in his lair of Aso Rock
who spread sorrow into every home
I say, Shame on you and your kind (43).

What is noticeable in the lines above is an aesthetics in which images are deployed to emphasise the fact that all is not well with the Nigerian polity. The poem depicts the state of affairs in Nigeria during General Sani Abacha's Junta and the stifling situation which the people found themselves in. The rulers in uniform dictated the affairs of state, not with the authority of the constitution but with the might of the gun. Each couplet reflects and philosophises the reality of living in Nigeria at the time. Ojaide employs invectives to expose the brutal reality of the living condition of the populace. The military government and their cronies are portrayed as economic saboteurs in their bid to enrich themselves by stashing away the national earnings in Swiss bank accounts.

Conclusion

Ojaide's poetic oeuvre demonstrates a lived and imaginative relationship with his homeland. It is this relationship he has with the Delta that informs his critique of the Oil Encounter. Ojaide's poetic aesthetic and practice is not grand but lyrical. Through his imaginative reconstruction of his Delta environment, the poetry campaigns against the way a neoliberal capitalism and the global race for oil have impacted people's lives. His figuration of the Oil Encounter is however not a grand narrative of epic quality of the kind that Amitav Ghosh calls for. In Ghosh's reading of Abdelrahman Munif's novels, *Cities of Salt* and *The Trench*, he dismisses both as 'an escapist fantasy' and 'a romantic hearkening back to a pristine, unspoiled past', respectively (2002:84-87). While Ghosh declares both novels as failing to address the grand narrative of the oil encounter, he appears to deny the writer the liberty of creative imagination that can be therapeutic and optimistic, even in the face of oppressive realities.

Peter Hitchcock's 2010 essay, 'Oil in an American Imaginary' picks up on Ghosh's pronouncements where he (Hitchcock) rightly affirms Ghosh's observation of a consciously muted imagination of the oil encounter in American literature. However Hitchcock makes a fascinating point which illuminates my argument. He avers:

If climate change has provoked utopian desires for a world beyond oil, a planet where oil does not and cannot centrally drive its economic activities, then that challenge must include an imaginative group of its otherwise abstruse narrative of modernity, *not in the mere content of oil's omnipresence, but in the very ways oil has fictively come to define so much of being in modernity* (2010:81, e.a.).

Hitchcock however does not refer to cultural production elsewhere—in Africa, for instance—that has attempted to address the oil encounter. This paper is an attempt at filling that gap, because African, especially Nigerian literature, hardly merits critical attention in the analysis of global petrofiction/literature. What the Nigerian example can show, is a distinctive oil encounter in the imaginative creation of a writer who uses his lived-experience to define what oil has come to mean within a specific

geographical space and socio-political context. This is even more so when that position derives from a sense of vassalage in a neo-colonial framework - as in the case of the Niger Delta people.

This is because the visible trajectories and socio-political realities that the Oil Encounter has etched on the Delta landscape need to be understood within what Harry Garuba calls ‘the complicated terrain of the unresolved ... incoherences (sic), contradictions and multiplicities’ (2005:65). The Oil Encounter and the politics that attend the production and distribution of oil resources have brought with it a multiplicity of paradoxes—of poverty and wealth existing at the same site, of a neoliberal capitalism associated with western ideals of democracy and a free market, but which do not translate into wealth, nor guarantee environmental and social justice for the autochthonous people. And paradoxically too, it is this atmosphere of anomie and of the unresolvable, exacerbated by the ‘grandiose’ Oil Encounter in the Niger Delta, that has given ebullient articulation to Ojaide’s poetry.

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***The Armchair Traveller:* Littoral Zones and the Domestic Environment**

Deb Mansfield

Abstract

This paper discusses specific connections between littoral zones and contemporary visual art practice. It draws parallels between the littoral 'brink', and escapist desires of the home dwelling 'armchair traveller'. Typical and atypical littoral regions are analysed within the context of a Southern Arcadia. The research project examined in this paper involves visual artworks produced during field trips to atypical littoral sites including; Launceston's Tamar Valley (Tasmania) and McIvers, Newfoundland. The discussion also draws on a key exemplar that elucidates the role of littoral zones as metaphor: Joseph Dufour's wood-blocked wallpaper *Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique* (1804), in addition to the writings of theorist Elizabeth Grosz who identifies the nexus between formed identities and the 'space of in-between'. The visual outcomes of the research project consists of photographic prints and tapestries. The materiality of these forms will be discussed in relation to domestic spheres, as well as the armchair traveller's locus between the binaries.

Keywords: Armchair Traveller, Atypical littoral zones, Domestic space, Islands, Littoral zone, French scenic wallpaper, Joseph Dufour, *Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique*, Newfoundland, Tasmania.

The Littoral and the Space of In-Between

While there is no single definition of a littoral zone, the general physicality of these regions is that they extend from the high water mark to permanently submerged shorelines. Littoral zones generally operate as broader characterizations of sub classifications, as well as having legal implications in some military contexts¹. But mostly, parameters of littoral zones are unique to their individual geographies, inclusive of lakes, rivers, wetlands and oceans (sometimes even extending to the edge of the continental shelf), with the breadth of tidal movement ranging from kilometres to minor shifts.

The direction of this paper however, is to discuss the potential for littoral zones to operate in three ways: firstly, as a physical illustration of all and any dualisms; secondly, as a metaphorical framework for addressing binaries or ‘forms’ and the spaces between them (what Elizabeth Grosz defines as the ‘space of in-between’); and lastly as a conceptual framework for the art practitioner, using my own photomedia-based research to elucidate these ideas. It is my argument that littoral zones have the capacity to represent ‘the very site for the contestation of the many binaries and dualisms that dominate Western knowledge’ (Grosz 2001: 93), and by highlighting the nature of these geographies – that they oscillate between land and water (they are not one form or another) – I will suggest that these spaces encourage exploration of *both* sides of an idea or position. This in turn creates a new vantage-point from which all forms can be re-considered, regardless of what subjects are addressed, that is sites, histories, and materialities.

Before moving forward it is important to cite Grosz’s definitions of ‘form’ and the ‘space of in-between’ since both these terms are recurring concepts in this paper and require clarification:

The space of the in-between is that which is not a space, a space without boundaries of its own, which takes on and receives itself. Its form, from the outside, which is not *its* outside (this would imply that it has a form) but whose form is the outside of the identity, not just of an other (for that would reduce the in-between to the role of the

¹ See extended definitions and sub-classifications of littoral zones in Frederic P Miller’s *Littoral Zone* (2010).

object, not of space) but of others, whose relations of positivity define by default, the space that is constituted as an in-between (Grosz 2001:91).

It is from this platform that the various works and histories mentioned, will be examined and interconnected in an attempt to situate the space of in-between, both as littoral geographies, and in the mind of the armchair traveller.

The *armchair traveller* is a curiously visual idiom. Visions of a daydreamer, or a lazy traveller opting out of the ‘real thing’, or even an agoraphobic, come to the mind’s eye when conjuring up this ‘character’. Here, the armchair traveller is defined as a figure who is physically located in a domestic, bounded space, while imagining the space of the littoral in order to enrich and even alter the domestic situation. This paper cites works that identify the armchair traveller as a female participant, and from my own research, I too have taken this position. But it is not necessary that any gender be specific to this construct, as the primary concern here is the relationship between the armchair traveller and littoral geographies – and this position holds projections and deviations for both men and women.

Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique

Ever since the emergence of Europe’s quasi-religious construct of a ‘Southern Arcadia’, littoral zones and their immediate surrounds have been a prominent visual icon of the Southern Hemisphere. During the 18th and 19th century explorations of the Pacific region, societies were perceived to either signify this Arcadian paradigm, (Tahitians and their ‘soft’ primitivism) or conversely dis-represent it (Aborigines and their ‘hard’ primitivism)². These new world ‘discoveries’ were popular in Europe (particularly in France) and reflected the lifestyles and interests of ‘Napoleon’s new elite’ (Terry 2000: 28). One of the art forms that reflected this interest in Pacific Arcadian landscapes was scenic wallpaper. French scenic wallpaper began in the late

² Bernard Smith discusses the categorizations of ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ primitivism alongside notions of a Southern Arcadia in *European Vision and the South Pacific* (1985).

18th century but went out of fashion approximately sixty years later (preceding photography). The wallpapers were a technical feat with elaborate scenes being carefully wood-blocked onto sheets of paper (usually linen rag). Entire panoramic ensembles consisted of anywhere between one to thirty-five individual panels. Some prints were black and white, but colour was a significant characteristic. The wallpapers were innovative for being able to respond to the architectural features by covering all the walls of a room, with only the doors and windows interrupting the visual sweep of ‘bringing the outside in’ (Nouvel-Kammerer 2000: 103-134).

The French scenic wallpaper, *Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique* (Fig. 1), was such an example. Designed by Jean Gabriel Charveret for Joseph Dufour and Company in 1804 in Macon, France, *Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique* was the first scenic wallpaper to be publicly exhibited, and one of the earliest to be manufactured. The wallpaper is approximately 10 metres long, consisting of 20 panels, each panel measuring 2.5 metres in height and 540mm in width. The landscape setting is attributed to Tahiti (Dufour 1924:403-412) and is based predominately on the Pacific explorations of Captain James Cook (1728-1779). The wallpaper was successful in part, due to a littoral design (attributed to Tahiti) that brought together twenty Pacific societies in a curious, neighbourly fashion. When viewing the paper from the confines of a 19th century bourgeois parlour room, it is easy to imagine that it would have evoked musings on universal harmony and similar Enlightenment philosophies popular for that period. Domestic spaces (such as parlour rooms), operated as a meeting place for family and visitors alike and became a ‘critical base for the Enlightenment and a site of contestation of the monarchy and of the nobility’ (Auslander 1996: 65).

The prospectus that accompanied *Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique* was written by the manufacturer, Joseph Dufour and gives directions on various hanging configurations and a key to understanding where the different island societies are located within the paper, including descriptions of activities, clothing and such. The wallpaper (as with parts of the prospectus) was based upon popular travel narratives and etchings that were published upon return of the voyages. As Nouvel-Kammerer has argued, ‘[T]here is a close connection between the titles of the most highly read books of the day and the subjects depicted by scenic wallpaper... [s]cenic

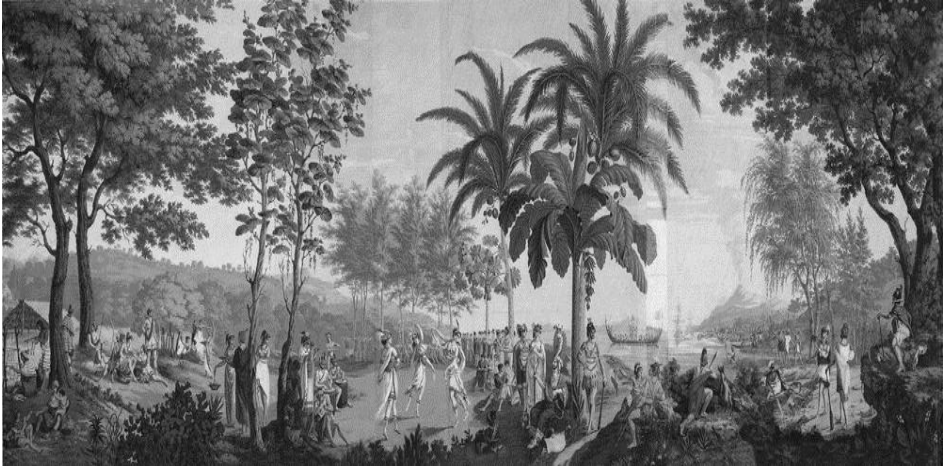


Figure 1. Panels 1-10 of *Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique* designed by J Gabriel Charveret for Joseph Dufour. c.1804.

wallpaper was an extension of the family library' (2000:104). These best-seller books captured the imaginations of their readers and consolidated European ideals of an exotic Southern Hemisphere - and all the wonderful and terrifying things that resided there. Although 'the design of panoramic wallpaper religiously avoided licentious or distressing images' (Nouvel-Kammerer 2000:108), the traumatic death of Captain Cook can be seen in panels 7 and 8 of *Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique*, though placed in the background, so as to not upset viewers with unnecessary 'horrors'.

Dufour gives an explanation of the wallpaper's conceptual rationale in the prospectus, highlighting his intention to use the wallpaper as an educational tool for young women:

A mother will give effortless lessons in history and geography to her eager, inquisitive and intelligent daughter whose remarks, more than once, will be an occasion for a kiss on her innocent mouth to silence the naivetés within it, or to make a response useful to her education. (Dufour 2000:33)

This suggests that bourgeois women and their daughters were the targeted

audience for *Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique*, and possibly the wider industry of French scenic wallpaper³, because as wives and consumers they had an obligation to ‘adorn themselves and... represent the family’s social identity through goods’ (Auslander 1996:221). The lure of ‘bringing the outside in’ (and in the case of *Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique* – bringing entirely new worlds in) was seductive, and encouraged bourgeois women to daydream of exotic far away places, whilst remaining within the confines (and safety) of the domestic unit.

When reviewing surveys of French scenic wallpaper, such as those conducted by Nancy McClelland (1924) and Odile Nouvelle-Kammerer (2000) it is apparent that littoral zones are a reoccurring if not dominant feature within these large-scale scenes. The inclusion of water, ‘play[ed] a key role in structuring the landscape by establishing a haven’ (Nouvel-Kammerer 2000:110), and was also used to establish plausibility for the viewer – who was able to recognise familiar rivers, lakes or oceans lapping upon *unfamiliar* shores (Fig.2).



Figure 2. Details of *Monuments du Paris* c.1812 (left) and *Les Incas*, (right) c.1818. Both manufactured by Joseph Dufour.

This design, even though illusionary, gave the viewer immediate access to exotic lands or to even time-travel back to historical events. And while these

³ ‘Moral and cultural education constituted the underlying weave of [scenic wallpaper]’ (Nouvel-Kammerer 2000:104).

waters and littoral zones within the wallpapers encouraged a personal migration or transcendence, they also operated as a gateway or space between out 'there' and in 'here', so that the viewer could also travel back again *over* the horizon line into to the confines of the domestic haven – and reality.

Scenic wallpapers were designed with this audience participation - and anticipation - in mind, encouraging their clients to project themselves onto the human figures depicted within the wallpapers. These alter egos 'reaffirmed to the bourgeoisie, their social standing and accomplishment in shaping the revolution to its own advantage – inventing haven-like interiors even as they acceded to public life' (Nouvel-Kammerer 2000:120). As Nouvel-Kammerer argues,

One of the original aspects offered by these panoramic decors was their glorified lofty vision of daily life. Scenic wallpaper illustrated the return to a golden age – people were good and lived peacefully with nature; they perpetuated the archetype of paradise even as the chaos of the French Revolution and Napoleonic wars reigned (2000:120).

It was not until the later years of wallpaper production (c.1830's and onwards), that human figures were removed altogether - the manufacturers had come to realise that a more imaginative experience could be achieved by relying on the viewer to project herself - *as she was* - into the exotic landscape. She could for a period, escape domesticity, immerse herself, and stand on the brink of another world. 'It was no longer a question of *depicting* the harmonious relationship between mankind and nature, but of *experiencing* a place where this symbiosis could occur every day' (Nouvel-Kammerer 2000:128). The golden sands, lush vegetation, blue water and skies depicted in *Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique*, operated as signifiers for an Eden-esque geography that have become synonymous with Pacific and Oceanic identities, and been revisited time and again by artists and industry alike (cf. Connell 2003).

However, the rise of this tropical 'mono-geography' has created a plethora of rejected or, what I will call, *atypical* littoral zones. These zones

are defined entirely by being *external* to this mono-geographic form and *not* by any real likeness amongst themselves. *Atypical* littoral zones are undefinable, and to do so by profiling ecological attributes would create a new 'form'. Grosz clarifies this atypical position of 'outsideness' as not necessarily negative, but rather 'the locus of futurity, movement, speed; it is thoroughly spatial and temporal, the very essence of space and time in their intrication' (Grosz 2001:94).

This statement is key for providing a new platform from which to view overlooked or *atypical* littoral zones, that being outside forms (and this pertains to both land *and* sea in addition to dominating littoral forms - such as the tropical 'Eden') they can represent the space of the in-between. This encourages 'the possibility of perspective to look upon the inside' where 'a rare and unexpected joy of outsideness [is] to see what cannot be seen from the inside' (Grosz 2001:xv). This is the potential for all aspects of *atypical* littoral zones and the armchair travellers who envisages them.

The Armchair Traveller

My own art practice has so far focused on four atypical littoral geographies: Moreton Bay (Queensland, Australia), The Mississippi River (Louisiana, USA), the Tamar Valley (Tasmania, Australia) and The Bay of Islands (Newfoundland, Canada). I have looked at these regions in relation to my own history of both imagining and ritualistically visiting the 'brink'. Still, travelling to the land's edge is a shared human desire, and Bruce Bennett writes that 'we all have a beach somewhere' (2007:31), going on to describe visiting his as a boy:

... located some fifteen kilometres from the city of Perth and eight kilometres from my home ... As you pedal steadily up the last of the sand dunes transformed into asphalt road, you catch your first glimpse of the ocean. Although it is early afternoon, the sea breeze is already in, and beyond the gleaming white beach, the blue sea is flecked with white... The beach is now very close, as you rest on the pedals for the last downhill run, then park your bike, grab your towel, and race for the water (Bennett 2007: 31).

Bennett's iconic beach is an typical example of the Southern Arcadian mono-geography (white sands, blue seas) that is typically embraced by the majority of Australians as the 'pre-eminent holiday destination'⁴, which historically, has been a holiday for 'everyone but the housewife, for her it meant a change of kitchen sink... [with] no real escape from suburbia and domesticity' (White 2009: 15). When reading the description of Bennett's beach it is easy to envisage (if not envy) his coastal haven, but it also exemplifies the long-standing and iconic relationship between (Australian) coastlines and the Australian male⁵. For women however, these spaces act as an extension of the domestic, bypassing any opportunity to look upon established forms from a new perspective.

My argument then is that is no longer enough for the (female) armchair traveller to experience the potentials of the brink with popular or even 'leisure-focused' littoral zones – where domesticity has encroached and male constructs dominate. Rather, it is in the *atypical* littoral zones, such as the mangroves, wetlands or cold islands at the end of the earth, where ambiguity prevails, and where prescribed domestic spheres can be assessed from the perspective of 'outside-ness'. Their attributes can be judged and weighted with the intent to affect change, as opposed to simply rehashing old spheres, roles and rituals – such as the beach holiday.

The question is though whether it is important to actually visit these geographies or if contemplating them as an armchair traveller is sufficient?

⁴ 'A Short History of Beach Holidays', by Richard White in *Something Rich and Strange* (2009), gives a historical account of the beginning and development of the Australian family holiday.

⁵ 'Historically, Australian men and women have been segregated at the beach, with women denied permission to participate in organised sporting events such as surfing competitions and females only permitted to sign up as lifesavers in the late 1970s. Even now, the concept of Max Dupain's Sunbaker (the bronzed, idealised masculine figure) is still packaged as the Australian beach myth, and marketed and sold overseas. The latest popular reality series Bondi Rescue (2006-2009) also reinforces masculine hegemony at the beach, maintaining the iconic image of all that we simultaneously celebrate with the ANZACs: duty, mateship, larrikinism, heroism and physical strength' (Cantrell & Ellison 2009:2).

Is it enough that fluctuating atypical littoral zones *represent* the space of in-between and ‘becoming’, or must they also be physically encountered? Grosz states ‘there can be no liberation from the body, or from the spaces or the real. They all have their nasty habit of recurring with great insistence, however much we try to fantasize their disappearance’ (Grosz 2001:18). My personal experience of physically visiting these geographies facilitates greater understanding (and navigation) of options available in the domestic sphere – alongside informing my studio practice. Nevertheless, I also have used atypical littoral imagery⁶ to access a new perspective of my place and role in the domestic sphere, a practice that supports the option of the armchair traveller as a viable ‘route’. Perhaps too, as scenic wallpaper has shown us, encouraging the armchair traveller to experience the ‘brink’ through littoral wall-decoration, can facilitate accessing the space of in-between because being anchored neither entirely inside nor outside the home, can present a perspective of both binaries without wholeheartedly committing to either. As Nouvel-Kammerer (2000:25) argues,

A private salon once cracked open, presented the same explosive of externalization offered by eighteenth-century camera obscuras and later panoramas. All three attractions played on notions of interior-exterior, confounding the dynamics of introversion-extraversion. Furthermore, scenic wallpaper altered conventional conceptions of domestic space, proposing a new phenomenology for interiors: the usual distinction between private interior and public exterior (whose point of intersection was the window, the site of exchange between both realms) was replaced by a play between two different exteriors, between two opposed natures – the real and the imaginary. Yet in both cases the gaze flew to a distant place.

⁶ Particularly with *Mangrove Wall*, which was installed in my own domestic environment (where it remained for four years). This work involved painting photographic liquid emulsion onto my living-room wall, projecting a mangrove image and then processing it in-situ. This can be viewed at: <http://debmansfield.com/artwork/2003-2>.

Tasmania and Newfoundland

With those abovementioned considerations, I have continued researching these geographies and their relation to the domestic environment, by regularly travelling to atypical littoral zones. For my current body of work, *The Armchair Traveller*, I completed artist-residencies in Tasmania (in summer 2009) and Newfoundland (in winter 2012). Both residency houses sit on the land's edge: the Tasmanian dwelling on a sheer cliff-face in Cataract Gorge, through which the South Esk River runs and meets the Tamar Wetlands. The house in Newfoundland, sits on the edge of the Bay of Islands, a fjord-like valley that runs into the Gulf of St. Lawrence (Fig 3).



Figure 3. Artist residency Houses; Tasmania (left) and Newfoundland (right). Deb Mansfield (2012).

Even though these cold islands are situated at opposite ends of the earth, they share several narratives, with the most prominent being that they exist

culturally and economically in the shadow of their mainland counterparts (the Tasmanian jokes I grew up with, are just as prevalent in Canada about ‘Newfies’⁷). Both islands have long - and in some instances, difficult - histories with primary industries such as fishing, sealing and forestry⁸. And curiously, they have also played significant roles in the historic explorations of Captain James Cook; who after completing a difficult, but successful mapping of Newfoundland, was promoted to lead the famous Pacific voyages (inclusive of Tasmania), which subsequently became the inspiration for Dufour’s *Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique*⁹. However, there has been a conscious effort with this research to avoid pictorial (and conventional) representations of Tasmania and Newfoundland. Rather the focus has been on the journey - inclusive of a timely pause in the domestic space before, between and after the island excursions. It is through this oscillating process that the space of in-between is introduced and afterwards, consolidated by studio research and making.

Upon return from the residency in Tasmania, several photographic-digital tapestries were mechanically constructed, with one particular photographic-tapestry upholstered into a reproduction *Louis two-seater* lounge to create the piece; *The Armchair Traveller (two-seater)* (Fig. 4).

⁷ ‘The ethnic label *Newfie* is a site of ideological dispute: for some, it is simply an informal term for residents and expatriates of the Canadian province of Newfoundland, for others it may function as an in-group term of solidarity which takes on negative connotations when used by non-Newfoundlanders, and for still others it is the equivalent of a racial slur.’ King and Clarke 2002, [abstract].

⁸ Further reading at: ‘At the Crossroads: Newfoundland and Labrador Communities in a Changing International Context’ by John C. Kennedy in *Canadian Review of Sociology/Revue canadienne de sociologie*. And: ‘Old Growth Logging: does it matter if environmental protection costs jobs?’ by Robert Gale in *International Journal of Environment, Workplace and Employment*.

⁹ Captain Cook visited Newfoundland in 1763-1767. The first Pacific voyage was from 1768-1761, the second from 1772-1775, and the third in 1776-1779, which ended with his death in Hawaii in on the 14th February, 1779.

This piece represents the style of furniture that would have furnished a parlour room in the era of *Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique*, and allows the viewer to consider the place where the armchair traveller began/begins her journey. The chair frame is ‘unfinished’ (it has not been stained or lacquered) to illustrate the combination of hand and machine-made carving, and the intersection where old and new technologies meet. This junction is critical to reflect upon, in that it addresses both the nature of dualisms and the constant evolution of materialities as worked on by industry. And as artist whose field of study is photomedia (which is continually evolving with new technologies), this dynamic is also ever-present in my own practice.

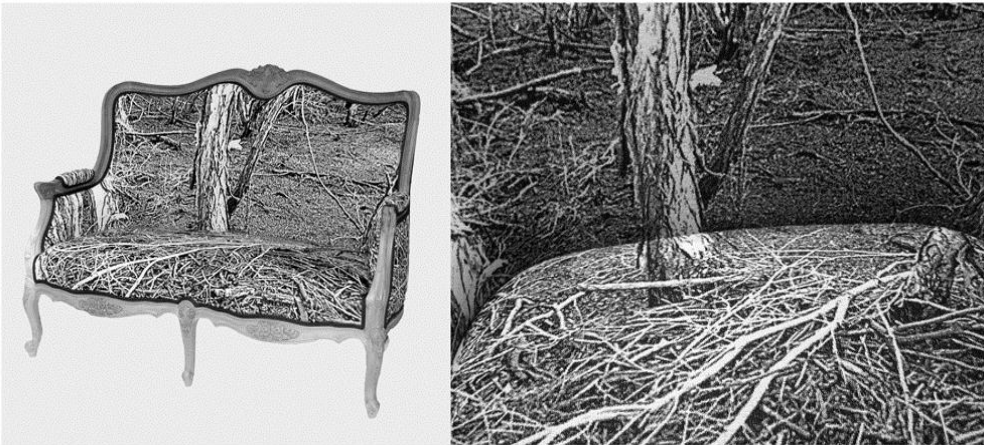


Figure 4. ‘The Armchair Traveller (two-seater). Deb Mansfield (2012).

As with all of the tapestries in *The Armchair Traveller* series, the wetland image upholstered into the chair is distinctly photographic, with digital pixilation identifiable at close range and the photographic aesthetic of a short ‘depth-of-field’ also noticeable. This is inconsistent with traditional upholstery (Auslander 1996: 70-271) yet the surface is clearly woven, and as such, comprehending the ‘how’ of the chairs’ materiality becomes a common audience response. The photographic-digital tapestry actually originates from a low-resolution image (scanned from film negatives) and is machine-woven, with much of the ‘process’ happening online and

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outsourced to factories overseas (the product is typically delivered by mail within a month). This process is at odds with the more traditional and individualised practice of tapestry weaving, and could be interpreted as sullyng the medium. However, a more empathetic view is the interesting position from which to view new technologies: photographic-digital tapestries have the potential to lead the viewer to meditate on old and new technologies, the industries that employ them and possibly the opportunity to look upon traditional forms from a new point of view. This dualistic perspective, in conjunction with the wetland imagery (which sits in direct opposition to the floral motifs conventionally associated with the Louis-style upholstery (Auslander 1996:280-285), may be understood as bringing the *atypical* outside in. The juxtaposition of classical French furniture with these unconventional geographies can initiate a contemplation of the space of in-between, and the audience has the opportunity to armchair-travel themselves.



Figure 5. ‘Four Littoral Zones’. Deb Mansfield (2012).

The folded tapestries in *Four Littoral Zones*, (Fig. 5) only partially reveal the littoral images that the title implies. Being folded, attention is drawn to the convention of ‘storing’ domestic coverings/linens in the home. The tapestries (geographies) remain folded until the time when they will be shaken out and viewed (encountered). This domestic instruction introduces an additional narrative validating the use of photographic-digital tapestries; *18th century wall-tapestries* (or wall-hangings). As precursors to 19th century French scenic wallpaper, *wall-tapestries* greatly influenced the designers of scenic wallpaper – even if the similarities were “an unconscious influence, rather than a willful imitation” (Samoyault-Verlet 2000:61). As Nouvel-Kammerer recounts, the botanical realism that had come to define scenic wallpaper in its later years was no match for the superior realism offered by photography (2000:128), and so *tapestry* and *photography* marked the beginning and end of 19th century scenic wallpaper industry. It is these overlapping narratives and materialities that have instructed the use of photographs, furniture and photographic-digital tapestries in my research, so as to draw lines between and amongst the various histories and art forms examined.

Photographic constructions in the domestic space have been a re-occurring process within my art practice¹⁰ and for this current work, the focus has shifted to the backyard. Similar to the verandah or porch, the backyard is a space between the home and ‘out there’, and represents what Moya Costello describes as an ‘intermediary space [where she] is comforted by *not* being in the landscape, fully exposed to the potential harshness of the elements – sun, wind, rain – yet still remain[s] in touch with its sensuality’ (Costello 2009:289). These backyards or verandahs can then be understood as another space of in-between, while also being ideal backdrops for photographic constructions. As such, the two photographic constructions, ‘The potential of planks on castors leaning between two houses’ and ‘The migration of an ocean (tapestry) into the space between house and fence’ (Fig. 6 & 7), are works that specifically address the idea of ‘potential’ or ‘becoming’ – of observing binaries and considering what *could* happen.

¹⁰ View ‘*Anticipating the Islands*’ at: <http://debmansfield.com/artwork/2005-2>.

These works do not attempt to answer these queries, instead they address the space in which these queries are contemplated.



Figure 6. ‘The potential of planks on castors leaning between two houses’. Deb Mansfield (2012).

‘The potential of planks on castors leaning between two houses’ shows planks of wood leaning up against a garden stonewall, held off the ground by several, raw-wood furniture castors, with an old twisted vine off to the side. The planks appear clean, domesticated and ready to be seized (sawed, fastened and hammered), and made into a form (possibly furniture, when considering the castors), but it is as yet undecided. The vine, which is old, twisted and darkly ‘exotic’, contrasts with the planks by firstly being *of* the

backyard (the vine grows up out of the concrete paving) and by also appearing beyond the potential of re-formation – except to be destroyed. The intention for this image, as with ‘The migration of an ocean (tapestry) into the space between house and fence’, is for the viewer to contemplate the dualisms of exotic/domestic and becoming/unbecoming, in relation to the space of hypothetical opportunities.

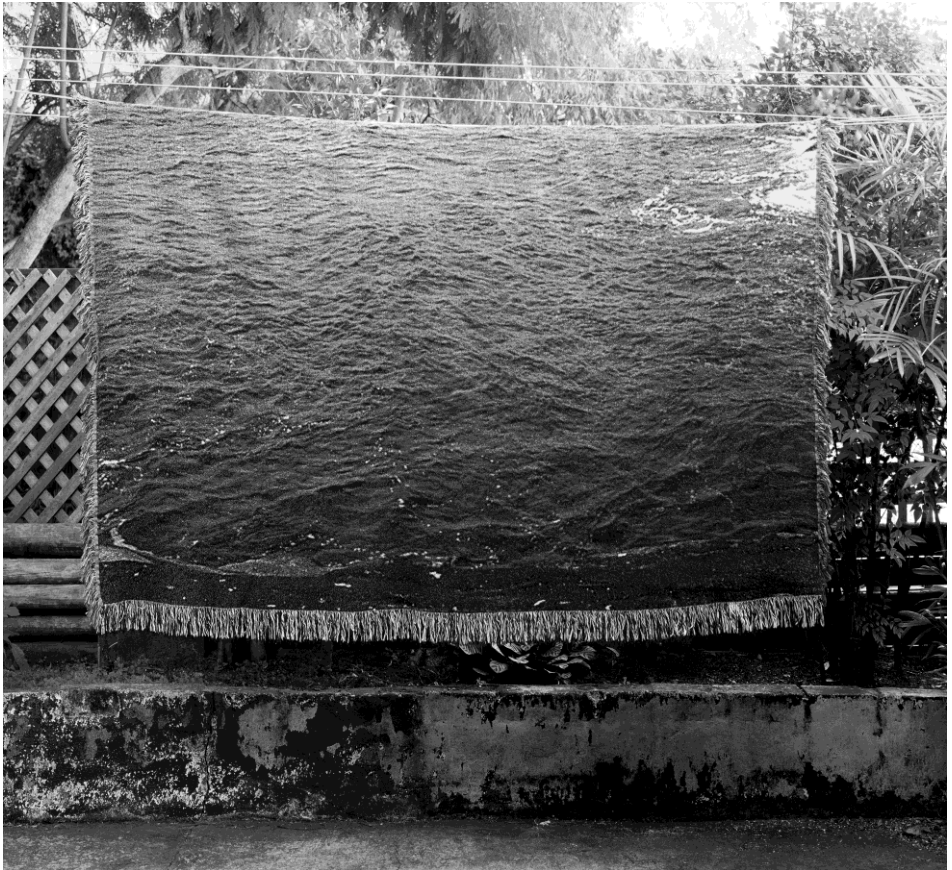


Figure 7. ‘The migration of an ocean (tapestry) into the space between house and fence’ (2012). Deb Mansfield.

Juxtaposing the shadowy stonewall, is *The migration of an ocean (tapestry) into the space between house and fence*, which reveals a large photographic-digital tapestry hung over a washing line in a small backyard. The image woven into the tapestry is of the ocean off the east coast of Tasmania (also part of the folded tapestries in *Four Littoral Zones*). There is a small amount of dark rock situated at the bottom of the tapestry and the remaining image is ocean, with no horizon line for the eye to escape over, which is again repeated in the backyard itself (the overexposed sunlight has bleached out any distant details). Visually, the viewer is caught *in* the space of in-between: in the space of the backyard and within the tapestry itself. It becomes then, not about taking the tapestry off the line, folding it, bringing it inside – nor is it about abandoning the domestic sphere for an isolated life on the ‘brink’ – it is never about preferencing one opportunity at the expense of its binary opposite. This is then the core sentiment of this research: there is no inclination to adopt one form over another, it is simply about identifying and enjoying the spaces between such points. In doing so, there exists the ability to effect changes upon forms or at the very least, see them from a new perspective. As such, the ingredients in the backyard; the planks and tapestry, remain in a permanent limbo of becoming – similar to the desires of the Armchair Traveller.

Sources of Illustrations

Figure 1: Dufour, Joesph 2000. ‘Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique’ in Hall, S (ed): *Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique*. Australia: National Gallery of Australia.

Figure 2: Nouvel-Kammerer, Odile 2000. *French Scenic Wallpaper: 1795-1865*. Paris: Musée Des Arts Décoratifs. (p.111 and p.162.)

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Amphibious Horses: Beings in the Littoral and Liminal Contact Zones

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Abstract

Horses galloping in littoral zones are represented as embodying wildness, freedom and a prelapsarian quality. Roy Campbell's 'The Horses of the Camargue' includes themes which recur in texts about littoral horses: the romanticising segue between the horses and the environment they inhabit, the ramifications of wild horse and human entanglement and the unavoidable loss of littoral equine 'freedom' when he is trained and/or taken from the sea. Yet Campbell's poem is dedicated to AF Tschiffely who rode two Criollo horses from Buenos Aires to Washington in 1925. If horses, generally, who cross boundaries between the wild and the tame, answer to those parts of ourselves which long for an uncomplicated connection with wildness, they also embody the potential for cross-species relationships based on training. Wolraad Woltemade's horse exemplifies equine trusting of a rider; Edwin Muir's poem, 'The Horses', stresses their desires for human connection.

This paper will then take a serendipitous journey in the company of threshold beings who whinny littorally through childhood adventure stories, *Misty of Chincoteague*, and *Big Black Horse*, and the more sombre tale, *The Homecoming*, to fetch up on the edges of a dam in Tokai where a herd of horses, and one in particular, surpass youthful fable. Horses are luminous beings who exist liminally as well as literally— in personal myth and in grounded, horse-human relationships on the sandy dressage arena as they teach the rider the stability to connect symbol and 'reality', heaven and earth.

Keywords: littoral, liminal, wildness, cross-species relationship, children's horse narratives

Horses are grounded animals, merging with environments which they grace with their presences. As Alice Walker so lyrically puts it, ‘Horses make a landscape look more beautiful’¹. In contact zones, they may, prosaically, perform labour or embody highly sophisticated training, but horses grazing in a field seem redolent of the ineffable. Somehow, they exist beyond the limits we set for them, inhabiting the spaces of the mind and of dream, where we may be lucky enough to encounter them. While I am writing this paper I dream of Galahad, the golden palomino whose life is inextricably entangled with mine: He is, effortlessly, at the bottom of a deep, clear pool, a water-being, entirely at home. He walks along the floor of the pool, hefts himself up glistening white steps, still underwater, and slowly moves from the submarine to the earth, a creature of the unconscious coming to the surface.

The very liminality of this horse gestures more broadly to representations of cross-species relationships with horses. Both dream horse and real horse, he symbolises the mundane and the mythical, the expected and the unexpected, a being I have called up imaginatively, and his own ‘real’ self beyond the dream. While horses have not evolved to have gills and cannot breathe underwater, herds of horses inhabit ecological niches between the sea and the land which extends further to nearby in-between spaces of marshes and quick-sands. Most famously, horses live littorally in the Camargue in France, as well as on Assateague Island near Virginia and Maryland and, more locally, around the Bot River estuary in the Western Cape, very close to Kleinmond where the Literature and Ecology Colloquium was held in 2011². Threshold beings of quasi-legendary status, littoral horses appear in a number of literary texts, both adult and juvenile, as I discuss below. In this essay they will also be accompanied by other horses who have bordered on the amphibious: an unnamed equine hero in the Cape Colony in 1773, a more personal equine hero who galloped through my adolescence and another who, amphibiously, moves between the quotidian and the liminal.

¹ The title of her poetry collection published in 1986 by Harvest.

² See online information provided by Kleinmond Kogelberg Biosphere, Assateague Island National Seashore, and Horses of the Camargue, discussed more fully below.

Riderless horses galloping through the surf symbolise the very essence of untrammelled freedom as their wildness is compounded and metonymised by the waves through which they move fluidly. They are other-worldly, beings from our primal memories before nonhuman animals were reduced in their numbers and in their powers, as nobly and independently they gallop beyond human discipline or taming. Through their beauty and strength they embody a prelapsarian wildness which we, mostly urban beings, may long for. Unlike other animals, such as domestic dogs or cats, who have been domesticated along with humans, horses exist on the thresholds of the wild and the tame, expressing our desires for wildness even as we train them. While some wild horse herds do flourish independently in littoral zones, humans always hover at the edges of the horses' worlds.

Roy Campbell's 'Horses on the Camargue' includes many of the tropes of wild horses and the sea. These horses are elemental, a very part of the ocean '[r]acing spray-curl'd', the Mistral 'whose strong gusts they love to flee' and wild weather as they 'hurl their thunderbolts of snow.' Supernaturally, 'theirs is no earthly breed' for if a Camarguais is rendered a 'slave' but smells the sea air, no matter how far away, he will 'in fury' unseat his rider and gallop to the smell of 'foam' and the sound of 'the native thunder of the deep.' More mythologically, these horses are '[t]he silver runaways of Neptune's car.' If even the sea-god has trouble domesticating them, they are not compromised by 'feel[ing] their Master's trident in their side' but are able to retain their wildness with 'white tails smoking free' due to their 'kinship' with the feminised waves. If this poem celebrates and reiterates conventions of wildness, littoral horses and their embodied connections with sea, wind and weather, Campbell's dedication of his poem to AF Tschiffely suggests another mode of relating to horses.

Tschiffely's Ride tells a classic story of a human-equine journey through South America and North America, from Buenos Aires to Washington, on Criollo horses, Mancho and Gato in 1925 (aimetschiffely.org/tschiffelys-ride.htm; accessed 15 November 2011). The naming of these originally feral horses differentiates them inexorably from Campbell's romanticised wild horses of the Camargue. Although they were described as difficult to train, they became so devoted to Tschiffely that he never needed to tie them up no matter where he pitched his tent for the night. Interdependent, Tschiffely and his horses traversed continents relying on each other for

cross-species friendships and succour. If this redoubtable explorer and his equine companions take us too far from littoral zones, however, the South African hero, Wolraad Woltemade returns us to a horse in the surf.

When Woltemade, an official of the VOC, was faced in 1773 with the spectacle of a sinking VOC ship near Salt River in Table Bay, he reacted to the cries of the sailors, by plunging into heavy seas with his horse to rescue the drowning men. Tragically, on his eighth mission to the ship, panicking sailors finally pulled both horse and his rider beneath the waves but not before the duo had saved fourteen men. That this great Friesian horse (which is how I, anachronistically, imagine him)³ would choose so generously to leave the safety of the sands for the danger of the waves in order to save human beings may seem extraordinary, yet the horse must have had a strong, committed relationship with Woltemade, so much so that he was prepared to contradict all his instincts and desires for self-preservation in order to please him. No spurs or whips would have been strong enough to persuade a horse to act so contradictorily. As Elaine Walker contends in relation to taking horses into battle '[a] horse that trusts his rider will face situations he would never dare to confront alone' (2008:120). Sandra Swarts, whose account of the horse-human heroism I rely on above (2010:123 - 124), reads this incident differently, however, aligning Woltemade's horse with the three thousand horses, 'victims of society's oppression' (2010:199) who died in the South African War.

To what extent a horse is able to express agency or choice in a human-horse relationship will vary from trainer to trainer, or from rider to rider. As my horse-trainer always stresses: 'If your horse does not listen to you he can kill you' yet we train to praise so that the horse chooses affirmation rather than a negative confrontation. The emphasis, then, is on the agency and co-operation of the horse in a cross-species partnership. Horses, if they are well-treated, will seek out connections with human and show immense willingness to work. As prey animals, it suits them to have a close bond with humans--who are predators. Vicki Hearne, poet, philosopher and trainer of horses and dogs, lyrically and humorously illustrates the persistence of equine instinct in 'Riding a Nervous Horse' who 'spook[s] at

³ Friesians were only exported to South Africa in the early 1900s (Doorndraaistud.co.za/doorndraai-fans/faq/ accessed 19 November 2011).

shadows' and bushes fearing 'horse eaters/That merely grin at me/But lust for him' (2007: 100 - 101).

A poem by Edwin Muir, 'The Horses' gestures to this paradox of discipline/equine agency in its representation of the post-apocalyptic advent of 'strange horses' who seemed to have emanated 'from their own Eden' and who are seeking 'that long-lost archaic companionship' with humans. Well after these horses change the lives of the stranded humans through their labour 'that free servitude still can pierce our hearts' (1973: 409). Fellow-survivors of a war which has ended the world as it was known, these horses hail from both a literal and a liminal space.

If the poems of Campbell and Muir are more late adolescent or adult fare, I recall as a child being fascinated by the phenomenon of Tschiffely's ride, if irritated by the book he wrote specifically for children from the point of view of the horses. It seemed patronising, both to horses and children, but other stories inspired me, even if, or perhaps because, they romanticised the entanglements between horses and humans. My late childhood and adolescence were horse-crazy. As a child I whinnied like a horse, arched my neck, pawed the ground. I sketched horses endlessly and ineptly. I trained our stubborn, tan dachshund (who had been expelled from obedience class) in lieu of a horse to jump over a course in the back garden. I collected horse ornaments which became part of the Wind Stables. Each horse was called after a wind; the exotic appellations Pampero, Chinook, or Simoom still take me back to stiff-legged china horses in a girl's pink bedroom—and some admiration for that child self who found such arcane names before the internet made research so easy.

Besides classic horse stories, three stories of horses in littoral zones appeared on my book shelves. As I re-read them today I am struck by the recurrence of certain themes, both explicit and implicit, from the 'The Horses of the Camargue': the romanticising segue between the horses and the environment they inhabit, the ramifications of wild horse and human entanglement and the unavoidable loss of littoral equine 'freedom' when he is trained and/or taken from the sea. I try to imagine what a horse-mad child, who still lived in the imagination with horses rather than interacting with them as embodied animals, absorbed from these novels. Susan McHugh in *Animal Stories: Narrating Across Species Lines* examines Girl-Horse Stories in a chapter called 'Velvet Revolutions.' She argues that while girls are the

‘stereotypic stewards of horsey things’ (2011:74) certain disturbing trends in horsey narratives are currently emerging in which ‘fictional horsewomen are cast increasingly on the defensive, victimized by a peculiar linkage of girlish love for horses with sexualized violence’ (2011:66). In the late 1950s and 1960s, girls were lucky to appear at all in the horse stories on my shelves. *National Velvet* (1935) by Enid Bagnold is about an unattractive girl and her horse counterpart who win the Grand National (the young, beautiful Elizabeth Taylor was entirely miscast) but *My Friend Flicka*, the first of a trilogy by Mary O’Hara focuses on a boy and a wild Mustang. The interchangeable Pullein-Thompson sisters, Josephine, Christine and Diana, whose popularity was at its height in the 1950s and 1960s, and whose horse books I read assiduously, wrote prolifically of boys and girls, as did the British Show-jumper, Pat Smythe⁴.

In *Big Black Horse* ([1941] 1953) adapted from *The Black Stallion* by Walter Farley (which has spawned a number of movies and a TV series) the subtitle *The story of a boy’s love for a horse* relegates girls to non-existence, and *Misty of Chincoteague* ([1947] 1961) by Marguerite Henry which has a brother and a sister saving up for the elusive Phantom and then vying to ride her, casts the sister as a jolly good sport who knows her place when her brother is triumphantly adventurous and wins the chance to ride the pony in a race. More disturbingly, *The Homecoming* (1964) by Marlana Frick, set near the Camargue, sets affection for humans and for animals against each other and feminises emotion. A character describes the love between a man and a horse as more substantial than that between a man and a woman, and the villagers laugh at the heart-broken elderly Valentin who cries for his condemned horse for “weep[ing] like a woman” (1964:10). The main male character has no female foil, but, implicitly, the horse serves a feminine purpose. The link between women and horses was illustrated for me when I lived in southern Spain, teaching English in Valencia and learning Spanish. I regularly rode an Andalusian gelding called Capriccioso through

⁴ That these very English children were ritually ‘blooded’ on their first hunt when the bloody stump of the fox’s tail was smeared on their faces points to a darker desire for wildness accessed through primitive hunting practices. The longing for equine wildness causes no harm unless it is sullied by the imperative to claim power *over* this wildness.

vineyards and by the sea, close to Gandia. When I asked for him once in his absence, his owner humiliated me in front of a bar full of wine-drinking men, scoffing at my desire to be partnered with Capriccioso: ‘When you have ridden one horse you have ridden them all. They are just like women!’

Big Black Horse, replete with lurid illustrations, tells of Alec Ramsay, returning home to North America after a sojourn in India visiting an uncle. En route, the ship he sails in picks up a fiery black stallion who has been captured by tribesmen in flowing robes and who is now confined in a stall on board. Alec builds up the horse’s trust by leaving him sugar lumps and when the ship begins to sink in a storm, instead of heading for a lifeboat and relative safety, the boy races to the horse’s stall to release the frantic stallion. In a panic the horse barges him and both fall into the sea. Alec manages to grab the Black’s halter rope and the horse swims them both to a small island. The romance between horse and boy, signalled by their galloping together through the surf, is interspersed by each saving the other’s life after being cast away. Alec washes and dries seaweed so the stallion can eat; the Black wakes the boy when his make-shift cover catches fire. The conflagration has alerted a passing ship which comes to rescue Alec who persuades the horse to follow the small rescue boat and to allow himself to be hoisted on board. Once they reach home, Alec blindfolds the terrified Black to get him down the gangway and then he transforms into a tame, apple-stealing horse who charms Alec’s parents – who agree that the Black can live in a barn down the road. And so this fairy story ends. As castaways, it is their living together in the littoral zone and their common suffering which cements the contact between them. The powerful, black stallion, so much part of the sea and its wildness, is tamed by a boy who knows little about horses. The exotic is even more firmly brought under civilised control as they leave the sea behind and reach dry land.

One of the recurrent formulae of horse stories is that of ‘a naïf find[ing] true love with a rogue’ (McHugh 2011: 66) and *Big Black Horse* is no exception. *Misty of Chincoteague*, however, takes this formula and then plays with reader expectations of the on-going narrative of this ‘true love.’ The young siblings, Paul and Maureen who are staying with their grandparents on Chincoteague, are enthralled by ponies and obsessed with the idea of owning and training the Phantom, a mare who has eluded capture during the annual round-up of wild horses on Assateague. In this round-up,

the ponies are herded and then swum over to the parallel barrier island, Chincoteague, where the young colts and fillies are auctioned off to raise funds for the Fire Company. The children both raise money by working equally hard at chores for the neighbours in the hope of buying the Phantom but because girls are not permitted on the round-up Paul plays the role of the hero, flushing the Phantom and her foal out of the brush, swimming alongside the horses and holding the head of the foal, Misty, above the water to prevent her drowning.

After the requisite setbacks, the children buy the mare and the foal, although their grandfather, who is a repository of homespun wisdom and nonstandard English, is adamant: 'The Phantom ain't a hoss. She ain't even a lady. She's just a piece of wind and sky' (Henry 1947:54). Together the siblings gentle the mare and ride her but never with a bit in her mouth, only a piece of rope. Even so, with the mare as a partner in this cross-species relationship (no piece of string could stop a horse who really wanted to take off) she remains elusive and detached. She has something 'far away about her' (1947:141) and a 'wild, sad look' (1947:143). Henry has it both ways: the mare has become tractable but she remains wild, elemental and then, in her natural swiftness, she wins a race ridden by Paul but only after he, rather than his sister, gets the lucky wishbone. Subsequent to this triumph, in which nature and wildness have been harnessed, the stallion Pied Piper comes to fetch the Phantom and escort her back through the waves to the barrier island. The mare has remained a littoral creature then, any training she acceded to merely a pretence of civilization overlaying the wildness at her core. The equine romance between mare and stallion has its parallel in the romance between the children and the foal Misty who has taken to their company and to training without a backward sniff at the sea. Only by proxy, has the Phantom has been tamed in the personage of her offspring who is naturalised in the human settlement of Chincoteague. Her essential wildness, however, remains inviolable.

Marguerite Henry claims in a frontispiece that 'All of the incidents in this story are real' and then proceeds to perpetuate the kind of originary myths which exoticise and romanticise feral horses as wild horses. Legend has it that the Bot River 'wild' horses, for example, are descendants of horses set free by British soldiers returning home after the South African War ([www. Kogelbergbiospherereserve.co.za/ content_1010500000_Kleinmond](http://www.Kogelbergbiospherereserve.co.za/content_1010500000_Kleinmond)).

htm; accessed 18 November 2011) rather than merely the remnants of domestic horses who have gone feral, which is more likely. Henry has the Assateague ponies as descendants of Moor ponies shipwrecked in a Spanish galleon headed for Panama where horses are worth their weight in gold. The National Park Service finds rather that ‘the most plausible explanation is that they are descendants of horses that were brought to barrier islands like Assateague in the late seventeenth century by mainland owners to avoid fencing laws and taxation of livestock’ (www.nps.gov/asis/naturescience/horses.htm; accessed 16 November 2011). The grandfather in the children’s narrative circumvents such binary thinking of legend and history, claiming that ‘legends be the only stories as is [sic.] true!’ (1947: 39). Visiting Chincoteague when I lived in Philadelphia was a great let down for my childhood imagination and any belief in the romance of littoral horses. The wild horses I mis-remembered from my childhood book are squat ponies due to their reduced diet of salt grass and they are bloated because of the excess water they drink to compensate for the quantity of salt they consume. The mosquitoes attacked us in swarms in spite of the constant wind. Now the very wildness of the horses themselves is debatable. The ponies have been enticed by visitors and have developed a liking for junk food. Agentively they endeavour to meet their new tastes: ‘A horse that is raiding your campsite and getting into your cooler—is that a wild horse anymore?’ asked Carl S. Zimmerman, a park spokesman. ‘That’s a shame, because that wildness is what makes them so special’ (www.washingtonpost.com/local/assateague-struggles-to-keep-the-horses-wild/2011/07/07.html).

The third text I had on my shelves as a child (and still have) about littoral horses, *The Homecoming* by Marlena Frick, is about a Camarguais. Unlike Roy Campbell’s spirited and mythical beings, this horse, originally from the Camargue and brought in like the horses in Assateague for auction, is now elderly and retired from hunting and farm labour. His owner wants to sell Pompidou for a few francs to a picador, but Valentin, the horse’s caretaker and an aged impoverished farm hand, cannot countenance the fate decreed for his beloved horse –of being gored to death and disembowelled by a maddened bull as part of the spectacle in the bull ring. Instead of escorting the horse to the picador in a neighbouring village, which is what he is ordered to do, Valentin heads for the Camargue, planning to subsist on fish and frogs while Pompidou returns to his native environment. By giving one

horse his 'freedom' he is attempting to compensate 'for all the world's butchered animals' (1964:74) as he tells a young boy living near the Camargue. Now a fugitive from the law, he is ashamed and cannot endure the thought of a court case and prison. The story ends tragically when the horse dies of exhaustion and a fever and Valentin walks into the quicksands of the Camargue.

The cover of the book depicts the ghosts of a horse and a man walking over the Camargue marshes under a full moon. The novel offers no such spiritualised redemption, although Valentin is comforted by the fact that Pompidou had died peacefully in a warm stable nearby, and the marshes with flamingos and a heron are beautiful. In closure the narrative suggests, but only in a muted way, that the horse and the man become one with the littoral zone that the horse had lost as a colt. When I first read the story I hated it. I wanted a happy ending, not a more realistic one. Reading it now, I am struck by the categorising of this novella as a child's book with sentimentalised illustrations. The themes of sexuality and death, the details about the practices of the bullfight, the subtlety of the way the final tragedy is represented, point to a narrative which only adolescents who have begun to wrestle more maturely with issues of cruelty towards nonhuman animals and the impoverished could appreciate. Ill-equipped to accept too much reality, I still expected horses from the Camargue to be free spirits, not farm horses or fodder for bull fights.

What I did understand from the novella was the love of a man for a horse and if it lacked drama and romance I had my own experiences of wildness and love in the littoral zone, as an adolescent in the Eastern Cape. The horse ornaments and the long-suffering dachshund had been replaced by weekly lessons at the Glenlyn Riding School, a very efficient and extraordinarily colonial establishment which boasted that the Princesses Elizabeth and Margaret had ridden there in 1947 on their visit to South Africa. In the 1960s their mounts, Jill and Treasure respectively, were still useful members of the school. We took Pony Club Tests⁵ designed in

⁵ The Pony Club, motivated initially by bringing horses into leisure activities, 'was established in 1928 It grew to become the largest associations of riders in the world, covering around 20 countries with over 110,000 members' (Walker 2008: 177).

England, read horse books about children who went fox-hunting in the mist, envied Princess Anne for her access to horses and were very well-behaved, children and horses alike. Then a friend of my father asked me to show his ex-racehorse and hack her out. After learning how to sit shies at butterflies, donkeys and hahdedahs, we progressed to long out-rides to Nahoon River and the beach. In retrospect I am astonished but immensely grateful that my over-anxious parents chose to remain ignorant of the dangers of a girl riding alone, through thorn-bush veld and a sinister disused quarry to the sea – with a horse for company and no means of alerting anyone in an emergency.

Once at Blue Bend, Lady remembered her race horse training on Eastern Beach and we would take off at a gallop between the sand dunes and the surf. All the tropes of littoral horses implicitly informed our races with the wind — becoming elementally part of the sea, the foam and the wind which we galloped through. Then my amphibious horse, unsaddled, would roll and roll in the sand and in the Bonza Bay lagoon, immersing herself like a seal in the brown water. The photographs which remain from this period are of Lady and me impeccably turned out, about to perform at a show, but the personal littoral myth-making has gone unrecorded.

More recently, I recorded the experience of watching my daughter as a young adolescent swim through a dam in Tokai on a black Friesian. Swimming a horse into deep water has its risks: a wet horse becomes slippery, and losing a grip on him means that you are in the water next to powerfully churning legs. Unlike my oblivious parents, I am aware of the dangers of riding, and, more particularly, of the courage it takes for horse and rider to leave the earth behind. Here is the poem, about an amphibious event, entitled ‘The Birthday Present’:

He displays nothing but his dark head
in the red halter
now parallel to the dam surface,
stirred with mud and clay,
and only a little of his usually arched neck

The girl-woman, poised
along the mane curling in brown water,
is submerged but for head and shoulders

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above his sixteen hands of pent power

As the ground shifts its haunches further
and they step into depths they cannot gauge
she rides bareback
towards the bravery he offers her
with each great flooded stride

When his hooves reach
the shore of the earth
they emerge, together, streaming:
the slight girl and the chivalrous horse
stepping into an ecstasy of arrival
no longer deferred

I cannot predict what she will take
from this epiphany
on her thirteenth birthday
into the myths of her life
but he has offered me a certainty—
this gracious high-stepping being—
as he stands, solidly again,
in conversation with the earth
and his observers,
slooshing rivers of mud-wetness
over me and the yellow grass
in the late-summer evening (Woodward 2008: 50).

After twenty-five years of merely dreaming about horses, I needed no persuasion when my daughter expressed an interest in starting riding lessons. She had a choice: ride at a stables in Constantia where her mount, who was delivered to her parcel-like, was an impeccably trained marionette trotting round a small paddock, or ride at the Country Club in Tokai where the horses lived out (not in stables) and where children learned to ride bareback and with a halter. Caley chose the latter – where the emphasis is on building a partnership with a horse, using your seat and legs rather than your hands,

working with your mind and that of the horse. Galahad, the horse Caley and I have shared for seven years, lives there in a herd of fourteen horses in a large area, roughly four hectares. We may be far from the sea and the littoral zones of my equine-adolescence, but on the sandy arena near the dam, training a horse has become a new kind of cross-species practice for me.

Paul Patton answers his question of whether ‘training of any kind [is] an indefensible form of co-optation of the animal’s powers’ (2003: 95) by maintaining, via Monty Roberts and Vicki Hearne, that if we acknowledge our horses and dogs not just as our ‘interlocutors’ but as ‘moral beings’ (2003:95) then we are in a position to recognise ‘ethical relations and obligations toward other beings’ (2003:95). Certainly, this is a position which we work towards in Tokai. When we train the horse in dressage movements, these become a kind of therapy to strengthen the horse’s musculature. The ultimate aim is for the horse to perform his own self carriage in a rounded shape, bringing the neck down and engaging the hindquarters, which emulates horses prancing in a field—not because it makes the rider feel good (although it does) but because it empowers the horse and makes cadence and impulsion effortless.

Training a horse is humbling. It means learning to be absolutely focused in the moment so that you do not give aids to the horse either prematurely or too suddenly. Ideally, your physical and mental capabilities are seamlessly engaged with those of your horse as you work towards harmony and a sublime balance. Because Chogyam Trungpa of the Kagyu lineage together with his spouse Lady Diana Mukpo were adepts at horseriding and the latter, in particular, a dressage rider, the practice of dressage as a training for Buddhist mindfulness has been recognised in this lineage:

The rider has to be completely present to be able to tune into the horse’s energy. When the rider’s mind and body are working in harmony, this synchronicity immediately manifests in the horse’s gait. The energy is able to flow freely—rider and horse are riding the energy as one (Contemplative Arts and Disciplines www.shambala.org/arts.php; accessed 2 May 2011).

Such spiritual practices recall the passionate harmony between horses and their environment in the littoral zones; ‘riding the energy as one’

could describe the Camargue horses galloping through the waves, even if it is discipline here which engenders this balance rather than an expression of wild freedom.

Partnering a horse, co-creating movements in the sandy dressage arena is motivated by the same desire of connecting with wildness in the littoral zones which Farley, Henry and Frick have their characters express and which I experienced as an adolescent galloping through the waves. If the romantic representation of horses mythologizes them in an uncontaminated, wild environment in Campbell's poem, the poems of Muir and Hearne focus on cross-species equine relationships. Threshold beings, amphibious creatures literally and metaphorically, horses, however, sashay beyond our myth-making littoral representations and the embodied realities of training. Eluding our representational nets or intellectualised paradoxes, they are utterly themselves, making landscapes and seascapes more beautiful from moment to moment.

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Whale-watching

Chris Mann

I was standing in a hot bright wind on a headland
looking out across the sea with a pair of binoculars
when I heard a voice call out, 'Look, there they are!'

My wife was pointing, she is in a way still pointing
across the crowds and the sun-umbrellas on a beach,
the lifeguards on a stand, the tiny heads in the waves.

I swung the glasses and saw a trough of rough water,
breaking, sealing, lifting and dropping in the swells
just where the edge of the land falls like a precipice.

'But isn't that a reef?' I asked. 'Or dolphins, playing?'
I gave her the binoculars. She put them to her eyes,
fiddled with the focus-wheel then stared and stared.

'No, it's them alright!' she said. 'Next to the gulls,
a mother and calf, I can even see the white patches,
what are they, like warts, along the top of her head!'

She handed me the binoculars. I paused, uncertain.
A spurt of gloom, as dark as the ink of an octopus,
was billowing through what little I knew about whales.

I'd seen Captain Ahab again, standing in a longboat,
gripping the tiller in the stern, stump-legged, cursing,
goading on the rowers, an eyeglass pressed to one eye.
What did he see in that brass-cased deadlight of a lens,

a blubber-hulk, breaching a swell like a whale-oil tank?
A devilish dark malevolence, tail up, spoiling for a duel?

Or did he foresee a kill, the dark-grey, heaving mound
roped to a ship as men in spiked boots sliced at its back
and gulls screamed and off-cuts floated on a slick of gore?

*Enough of that, I thought, no more of Ahab's nemesis,
at least for now!* With that I shook him off,
I shook old Ahab's muttering ghost right out of sight

and saw in the bright glass portal of the binoculars
a whale-song mother who wallowed with her calf
across the light green swells, the white sand of a nursery.

Rising, sinking, sieving the water with mouths agape,
shooting up breath like towers of bubbled, airy light
they swam protected seas, safe in that open-ended O

the halo of a saving vision, a vision which had made,
at least for now, the blood-dark seas of Ahab's line
a salt-bright sanctum for the song-ships of the deep.

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Author's Note

The year 2011 marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of the International Whaling Commission's moratorium on commercial whaling.

During the last three centuries whales were hunted almost to extinction.

The number of southern right whales dropped from over 50 000 to fewer than 500. Their population is now slowly increasing.

Chris Mann

Whale-hunters called them ‘right’ because they moved ponderously, floated for hours after being harpooned and provided plentiful whale-oil, a significant source of energy for lighting.

Herman Melville in his epic novel *Moby Dick* symbolised the ravenous demand for whale-oil in the character of the obsessive and self-destructive whaler Captain Ahab.

As summer approaches and southern right whales swim from the Antarctica to calve around our shores, we celebrate their survival.

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Hardy, Marguerite Poland and Chris Mann as well as an article on wild life documentaries. In addition, she has a chapter in a Cambridge Scholars publication, *Toxic Belonging?* and has written book reviews on Kobus Moolman's poetry and Joanne Richards' novels. Contact details: patzini@gmail.com

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Contributors must submit *one computer-generated and three double-spaced printed copies* of the manuscript. Up to 10 original off-print copies of the article will be returned to the author after publication.

Manuscripts should range between 5000-8000 and book reviews between 500-1000 words. However, longer articles may be considered for publication.

Attach a cover page to one manuscript containing the following information: Author's full name, address, e-mail address, position, department, university/ institution, telephone/ fax numbers as well as a list of previous publications. Authors must also submit a brief academic biographical sketch of about sixty words, indicating institutional affiliation, main scholarly focus, books published, significant articles, and/ or academic journals regularly contributing too.

Maps, diagrams and posters must be presented in print-ready form. Clear black and white photos (postcard size) may also be submitted.

Use footnotes sparingly. In order to enhance the value of the interaction between notes and text, we use footnotes and not endnotes.

Authors may use their own numbering systems in the manuscript.

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The full bibliographical details of sources are provided only once at the end of the manuscript under References. References in the body of the manuscript should follow the following convention: Dlodlo (1994:14) argues ... or at the end of a reference/ quotation: ... (Dlodlo 1994:14).

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Head, Bessie 1974. *A Question of Power*. Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers.

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Mngadi, Sikhumbuzo 1994. 'Popular Memory' and Social Change in South African Historical Drama of the Seventies in English: The Case of Credo Mutwa's *Unosimela*. *Alternation* 1,1:37-41.

Fanon, Frantz 1986. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Markmann, Charles Lam (trans). London: Pluto Press.

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