

Introduction

Birds: In and Out of Literature

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Abstract

Coming out of the University of Zululand's 2008 Literature & Ecology Colloquium at Twinstreams Environmental Education Centre, this special issue of *Alternation* is devoted to articles about birds, in and out of literature. The birds under discussion range from the symbolic to the literal, the mythological to the real, and the local to the cosmopolitan. The twelve articles, book review, and two review articles contribute in multiple and compelling ways to ecological literary criticism (ecocriticism) in South Africa and beyond, while the section titled 'Recently Reviewed South African Life Writing Publications VI' continues a regular feature in *Alternation*.

Key Concepts: ecocriticism, birds, ecology, South African literature

In July 1992, on the brink of a new political dispensation in South Africa, the University of Zululand hosted a conference for the *Association of University English Teachers of Southern Africa* (AUETSA) with the theme 'Literature, Nature and the Land: Ethics and Aesthetics of the Environment'. In view of the momentous political events in South Africa at that time, the fifty-two collected papers reflect a surprising amount of interest in matters pertaining to the natural environment, both in the South African literary community and abroad. Academics and writers such as Bernth Lindfors, Dorian Haarhoff, Koko Amuzu, Craig MacKenzie, Abner Nyamende, Rob Gaylard, David Atwell, Michiel Heyns, Lesley Marx, and Julia Martin gave papers at this

meeting. The gathering played an important role in laying the foundation for further developments in South African ecocriticism for the following decade.

In the years that followed the political transition in South Africa, the interest shown at the 1992 conference seemed to wane, even as the ecocritical movement in North America gained momentum. However, in 2004 ecocritical issues were taken up enthusiastically by Dan Wylie at Rhodes University, where he organised a Literature & Ecology Colloquium on a 'wilderness' theme. This initiative was followed by two more colloquia in 2005 and 2006, and a network of literary scholars working on landscape, environmental issues, and animal studies began to be established.

The University of Zululand again made a contribution to the development of ecocriticism in South Africa by hosting the 2007 and 2008 Literature and Ecology Colloquia at Twinstreams Environmental Education Centre, Mtunzini. The themes that were chosen for the Zululand meetings were 'Forests in Literature' (2007) and 'Birds: In and Out of Literature' (2008). These two themes are broadly representative of two important fields of study: a focus on topography (or setting) in the first instance, and a study of animals in the second. There has been some discussion in the colloquia of the possibility of forming a separate Animal Studies group, but for the moment Animal Studies forms part of the general ecocritical category.

It must be mentioned that these Literature and Ecology Colloquia are not the only manifestations of interest in ecological criticism in South Africa. In 2007 the *Journal of Literary Studies* published two issues on the theme of ecocriticism, edited by Erika Lemmer (Volume 23,3 and Volume 23,4). As yet, no academic journal in South Africa is dedicated to this field of study, but hopefully one will be established in the near future.

Ecocriticism, or ecological literary criticism, is a developing field and as such has come under a good deal of criticism itself. It is instructive to go back to the basic description of the term, articulated by Cheryll Glotfelty in her introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* as 'the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment' (1996:xviii). Terms such as ecolit, ecopoetry, and even 'ecohesitation' (Slaymaker 2007:684) have since come into use. Scott Bryson describes ecopoetry as,

[a] subset of nature poetry that, while adhering to certain conventions of romanticism, also advances beyond that tradition and takes on distinctly contemporary problems and issues (2002:6).

Ecocriticism has broadened its scope from a focus on contemporary nature-writing to other forms of writing, both fictional and non-fictional, covering many different periods of history (Armbruster 2001:2). John Elder writes that traditional nature writing ‘invites our attention to literature’s much more diverse, and never ending, conversation with the living earth’ (2001:viii). However, the question of what constitutes ecocriticism continues to be challenged.

William Slaymaker, for instance, distinguishes between writing on landscape themes and ecocriticism. He maintains that while African scholars have written about African landscapes, they have shown little interest in conservation problems. Referring to Christine Loflin’s *African Horizons: the Landscapes of African Fiction*, he notes that ‘[t]here is little in her book that relates to ecology, environmental degradation, and depredations of land and animals’ (2007:683). Slaymaker seems to require that the words ‘ecology’ or ‘environment’ appear in a writer’s work for it to be regarded as ecocritical. In a discussion of the poetry of Osundare, he writes:

Aderemi Bamikunle categorizes Osundare as a nature poet interested in both Edenic and exploited West African landscapes, but he does not go so far as to use the words *ecology* and *environment* in any of their current incarnations in the developing lexicon of ecocrit and ecolit (2007:686).

This seems to point to a much narrower understanding of ecocriticism than that put forward by Glotfelty. Erika Lemmer adopts Glotfelty’s inclusive approach and sees ecocriticism as ‘an overarching concept that accommodates a wide range of theoretical approaches and world views’ (2007:225). However it must be noted that black African critics are absent from Lemmer’s collections, which does seem to give some strength to Slaymaker’s argument.

With these preliminary and perhaps controversial remarks in mind, we would like to introduce you to this issue. The 2008 Colloquium comprised a small but lively and enthusiastic group, many of whom are keen

bird-watchers. Twenty papers were presented over two days. The group was given a 'slide show' on local birds by Michael Blose, a representative of the organization BirdLife South Africa. He is one of the leading members of this society and is proof of the excellence of black African birding guides from KZN. This presentation set the tone for a racially mixed and multi-voiced gathering at Twinstreams, which is reflected in the collection of papers here.

The literary texts that were chosen for presentation were from a variety of sources, both African and non-African. Syned Mthatiwa gave a paper on a Malawian poet, Jack Mapanje: 'Bird metaphor in Jack Mapanje's *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison* and *Skipping Without Ropes*'. Mapanje employs bird metaphors in order to write about the repressive Banda regime in Malawi. His focus is mainly on the suffering of political prisoners and the way birds either exacerbate their suffering or give them hope for release. Although this essay offers a contemporary African paradigm with regard to nature, it also refers to a traditional African paradigm such as the belief that some people own certain animals by magic (for example, the lion, hyena, and bat), and that they can send these animals to their enemies to torture them.

Important insights into the meaning and value of birds in African cultures are given in the essays by Sister N. Gloria Irenata Biyela and Ruth Babra Gora. A traditional Zulu paradigm is given by Biyela in 'Popular Predictor Birds in Zulu Culture'. This study focuses mainly on Zulu proverbs which involve birds, and it shows how these proverbs function in regulating behaviour and protecting the avian community. For instance, although hunting birds is a popular adventure for young boys, there are restrictions. Hunting brooding birds is forbidden, as is killing the Diderick Cuckoo and the Ground Hornbill, for different reasons. Biyela draws a connection between the ethical norms concerning birds and those concerning human society.

Gora's article, 'The Role of Bird Characters in African Story and Myth' shares a good deal in common with Biyela's paper, but it differs in that it focuses on birds in African folktales, myths and legends. Whereas Biyela gives an in-depth study of Zulu culture and thought, Gora's article includes many different African cultures. Birds in African oral stories often have a magical element and are sometimes seen as a medium of

communication with the spirit world. This is a universal phenomenon and present in virtually all cultural traditions.

In their contributions to this issue, Chris Low and Ian Glenn bring still other extra-literary perspectives. Low's 'Birds in the life of KhoeSan, with Particular Reference to Healing and Ostriches' invites a consideration of the role of birds among the KhoeSan, both historically and currently. Engaging with renowned anthropological studies while weaving in his own research experiences amongst the KhoeSan, Low articulates sophisticated relations between diverse groups of southern Africans and the birds with whom they share the world. His paper details the significance of birds as augurs (through the reading of bird behaviour), as adornment (with feathers and bones worn during ritual dances) and, most comprehensively, as medicine (to treat a myriad illnesses and discomforts)—all of which serve as reminders that valuable ways of knowing exist prior to, and outside of, the Western intellectual tradition. Indeed, Low's research advocates a rejection of Western paradigms in order to fully comprehend the Khoesans tradition.

The development of Western epistemology serves in part as the subject of Ian Glenn's essay, 'Levaillant's Bird Books and the Origins of a Genre'. Glenn argues that François Levaillant's lavishly illustrated bird books have been ignored in considerations of the genre's origins in South Africa. Building upon work he has published elsewhere extolling Levaillant's contributions to ornithology and natural history (primarily through the development, in the late 18th century, of techniques for mapping animal distribution, preserving bird specimens, and reproducing colour plates) Glenn posits Levaillant as an influential figure who deserves credit for his early work. In nearly every way, Levaillant was an innovator whose formal decisions—whether using illustrations to describe bird behaviour or using musical notation to record bird song—have had lasting repercussions throughout the history of natural history.

Moving from a consideration of birds themselves and how they interact with human systems of knowledge-making, we find Pat Louw and Dan Wylie writing about birds in the work of two white African poets, Chris Mann and Sydney Clouts, respectively. Louw's essay, 'Reading Space and Place in Chris Mann's Bird Poems' examines the way birds are represented dramatically in encounters between the speaker and the bird. The surrounding spaces in which these meetings take place help to construct the

meaning of the relationship between the human and the nonhuman. This is related to an ecocritical approach to setting. Michael Bennett says that traditional literary analysis treats natural spaces and topographical features such as mountains as metaphors (2001:197), whereas the literary analysis of space and place is something that has contributed to making ecocritical criticism different from what went before. Mann uses human metaphors to describe birds rather than the more traditional use of birds as metaphors for human society.

Dan Wylie's paper, "'Lines of Flight': Sydney Clouts's Birds', goes further in analyzing metaphorical complexity. In providing a comprehensive litany of examples, Wylie argues that birds in Clouts's poetry explore 'the tension between the stratifying or concretising compulsions of language and form, and the supra-human or ecological sense of the interfusion of all things and their qualities'. The challenging language of Wylie's contemplative approach emerges from, circles about, and interweaves with that of French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, whose signal work, *A Thousand Plateaus*, provides such phenomenologically illuminating and intellectually frustrating concepts as 'becoming-animal', 'the rhizome', 'deterritorialisation', and 'lines of flight'. Zeroing in on this latter notion, Wylie argues that Clouts's depiction of birds embodies layers of meaning, enacting simultaneously avian lines of flight away from the earth, human lines of flight (epistemologically) away from the natural world, and lines on the page that disrupt easy identification between word and world. This paper adds to Wylie's recent critical work of recovering Clouts as an important South African poet whose best work defies glib dismissals while adding to a growing body of ecologically oriented criticism.

Deleuze and Guattari make an encore appearance in Travis V. Mason's 'Toward an (Avian) Aesthetic of (Avian) Absence', a comparative study of British, South African, and Canadian poems about birds and birding. But while Deleuze and Guattari (alongside Martin Heidegger) offer ways of thinking about how birds express their birdness (through physical qualities) in relation to defining territories, Mason focuses his discussion on close readings of short lyric poems interested in how respectful proximity between humans and birds can create a distance necessary for bird conservation. An aesthetic of absence, Mason argues, confronts a human rage for proximity that results, at its extreme, in extinction, the ultimate absence. After looking

in the essay's first half at how poems by Thomas Hardy, Don McKay, and Ingrid de Kok set up a paradigm of attending to distant birds, Mason turns in the second half to consider works about penguins by Phil Whittington, Jeremy Cronin, and Ruth Miller in an effort to provide a case study for an aesthetic of absence. His readings of these penguin works (a book for young readers and two poems) extend the phenomenological conceit of the first half while considering the real-world impact of oil spills on penguin colonies. Ultimately, Mason argues, texts that privilege a particular aesthetic of absence offer the most compelling ways of modifying the careless proximity prevalent in modern Western epistemologies.

Myrtle Hooper's "'The long wait for the angel": Sylvia Plath's "Black Rook in Rainy Weather"' moves the discussion fully beyond South Africa's borders, offering close readings of Plath's poems that mention rooks. The poems under scrutiny in Hooper's essay are not what would typically be considered 'nature poems', and yet Plath's attention to the natural world across her considerable *oeuvre* suggests that her choice of bird in these three poems is not incidental. The specific characteristics that rooks are known for—their appearance and behaviour—in both nature and literature, imbue Plath's poems, according to Hooper's readings, with subtle rhetorical power. Indeed, the poems are more powerful for what Plath chooses not to say about the rooks. Like individual rooks, Hooper suggests, the best poems elicit constantly shifting responses from observers and readers alike.

Catherine Addison broadens the canvas by tracing the nightingale's many incarnations in European and Asian poetry in her essay "'Darkling I Listen": The Nightingale's Song In and Out of Poetry'. She covers a vast expanse of literary history, referring to such poets as Sappho (7th Century BC), Ovid (Classical), Sidney (Elizabethan), Keats (Romantic), Barrett Browning (Victorian), and Lawrence (Modern). The myth of Philomela and the ancient Persian legend of 'The Nightingale and the Rose' are also included in this study. Fresh perspectives are given on well-known poems and some lesser known poems are brought to light. However, as its title suggests, the essay does not focus exclusively on poetry. It begins with a discussion of the phenomenon of sound and especially birdsong, in an attempt to uncover the actual song of the nightingale divested of its cultural meanings. Addison's interdisciplinary research reveals interesting ornitho-

logical facts and theories about bird song and its effect on composers of human music. Finally, she leaves the reader with a thought-provoking question about why the sorrowful female nightingale is such a well-known symbol in European culture.

The nightingale reappears in the essay, “... singing at a work apart ...”: The Search for the Woman’s Poetic Voice in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh*’ by Taryn Laing-Cox. Barrett Browning is very much aware of the repressive nature of Victorian society with regard to the position of women, and in particular for women who wish to be poets. She uses the symbol of the nightingale and the lark to explore the possibilities of finding a female poetic voice. Laing-Cox provides a thorough critique of *Aurora Leigh*, linking its form as a verse novel to the importance of the bird tropes. The way in which bird imagery is used to resist the limitations imposed on the writer by a repressive society is similar in some ways to the function of bird imagery in Mapanje’s poetry under the Banda regime in Malawi.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the majority of essays in this special issue trace the presence of birds in poetry. As Leonard Lutwack claims in his book-length overview *Birds in Literature*, ‘Few poets fail to respond to birds’ (1994:xii). So it is both unexpected and exciting to have Wendy Woodward offer her meditation on birds that appear in a handful of Southern African fictions. In “‘Who is to say ... that the hen did not speak?’ Bird Subjectivities in Some Southern African Narratives’, Woodward demonstrates that birds live rich fictional lives, as well. Building upon work she has published on animals more broadly, she makes a case for considering some fictional birds as expressing subjectivities, which many writers tend to neglect. Woodward is interested in picking out those birds whose agentive existence profoundly influences the human characters around them while inviting readers (and critics) to reconsider what it means to recognise avian subjectivity. The relations between birds and humans in the examples Woodward examines are relations that, as her inclusion of recent news items attests, exist both on and off the page.

The feminist concerns of Laing-Cox’s essay are taken up in the book review article: ‘Springing the Cage: The Role of *Engaging the Shades of Robben Island* in Constituting the Field of Postcolonial Ecofeminism’ by Priya Narismulu. The caged bird is a well known symbol not only for a literal

prisoner, as in Mapanje's Malawian prisoners, but also for the figurative prisoners of repressed women in a patriarchal society. Narismulu shows how Deela Khan's poem, *Engaging the Shades of Robben Island* combines postcolonial and ecofeminist issues. Both forms of domination come from a patriarchal mindset which is shown to be destructive to people as well as the natural environment. Khan's poem is thoroughly examined within an enlightening theoretical framework.

Continuing the narrative thread, we find in Judith Lütge Coullie's review article some stimulating thoughts on the blend of fact and fiction in recent life writing which has been published in South Africa. She compares the genres of biography and autobiography with regard to subject matter, and draws attention to the proliferation of this type of writing in recent years. The reviews raise questions about the framing of facts in an interesting and dramatic way. This relates to the genre of creative non-fiction, which is generally used for nature writing and is thus of interest to ecocritics. In addition, life writing involves the connection between the human subject and place, an important ecocritical theme.

In conclusion, this group of essays covers a range of material from both the northern and the southern hemispheres. The writers are multi-cultural, and give differing perspectives on the environment according to both European and African paradigms. While there are some striking contrasts, there are also many things held in common, not least of which is the attention to birds in and out of literature. By assembling these views we hope to make a contribution to the ongoing conversation between ecocriticism, postcolonialism, and other critical theories.

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