

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, Pieterella is moved from her place of birth and early childhood and is sent away to Mauritius. I will look at the three stages in Pieterella’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

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 Pietermella, 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 Pietermella'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).

Pietermella 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. Pietermella 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 Pietermella 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: Pieterella, 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 Pieterella and is probably unaware of how much the word 'Hottentot' upsets her. However to counteract this attack on Pieterella'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 Pieterella, 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 Pieterella's household an early warning signal so that they too can prepare themselves for what could otherwise devastate their home. When Pieterella 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

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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Pat Louw

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